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OR, The Sphinx of Leadville.

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CHAPTER I.

MUTTERINGS OF A STORM.

A MAN slightly past middle age, with a smoothly-shaven face and keen, gray eyes, was comfortably seated in a broker's office. He was of more than ordinary stature, and a dark, neatly-fitting business suit revealed the strong, yet graceful proportions of his form. His head was thrown back, and he was lazily and thoughtfully watching the blue spirals of smoke that mounted from his cigar toward the ceiling. A bit of the cigar ash falling on the lapel of the dark coat, he flecked it away with a hand that was firm and white, and on the little finger of which blazed a ring of massive gold set with a large diamond.

FROM THIS POINT OF VANTAGE SOCORRO SAW KARL BOUND AND SURROUNDED BY THE ENRAGED CANYON COHORT.

A creaking sign above the door of the office held the name of "Andrew Jackson Taggart, broker;" and this was Taggart himself.

From the small, square window opened an extensive view of the ragged and unkempt Camp of the Carbonates;—for this was in the early days, when almost every man in Leadville considered himself only a pilgrim and sojourner, whose sole business in life was to make a hasty fortune there and retreat to the haunts of civilization and enjoy it. The hillsides and slopes were bare, and blackened by the fires which, starting from the multitudinous charcoal pits, had at different times swept over the region, and the view was not made more attractive by the unsightly mounds of earth and prospect-holes everywhere visible.

Leadville, now a city of many thousands of people, was then only a wild mining-camp, whose habitations were mainly log huts, board shanties, canvas tents, and kennel-like structures dug into the hillsides and roofed with earth and pine boughs. In fact, the place had once been known as Boughtown, and had not yet evolved from the condition which gave it the title.

But buildings were being erected, however, and among the best of these was the almost palatial residence of the broker, built not far from the office, and the smelting works further down the slope, for Taggart was not only a broker, as the sign implied, but was engaged in extensive mining and smelting operations.

There was a sumptuous, well-fed air about the man as he reclined in his easy-chair, forcing the conviction that his outlook on the world was pleasant, his days full of ease and contentment, and his life one to be envied.

It would be hard to determine of what he was thinking, for the smile that now and then played across his face was frequently chased away by a frown. It may be of his first visit to the place, years before, when he washed a small fortune in gold dust from the sands of California Gulch, and discarded as of no value the heavy, black carbonate of lead which collected so plentifully in the bottoms of the pans and rockers that it interfered with the work; and how this same obnoxious material was the basis of the present excitement in the great Carbonate Camp. He could afford to smile at the errors of that earlier time, since a shaft of his now tapped an apparently inexhaustible bed of the silver-bearing metal, and Fortune seemed to hold out promises more alluring than any with which she had gilded the past.

The frowns came, however, almost as frequently as the smiles; and when the angry echoes of a tumult drifted to him from the lower slopes, they wrinkled and blackened like gathering thunder-clouds.

The ominous sounds increasing in violence, the broker's feet came down from their elevated position, the half-smoked cigar was cast aside, and he arose and walked uneasily toward the open window.

"The dogs are showing their teeth again!" he snarled, glancing in the direction from whence the sounds had come. "As devilish a lot as ever whined and barked at the heels of their betters! Well, they may howl as much as they please, I'll never yield to their greedy demands."

He took a turn or two about the room, and again came back to the window.

The men were in sight, now, and coming slowly up the slope. They were a group of typical Western miners and laborers, arrayed in rough garb, the prominent features of which were red shirts, big boots, and ponderous revolvers swinging from leather belts clasped about the waist. It was very evident at a glance that the majority of them were toughs of the worst and most villainous character.

Catching sight of the residence and office they unb burdened their feelings by giving vent to a series of yells and defiant growls.

This manifestation of their displeasure caused the broker to shake his fist at the open window and swear with fervid eloquence.

"I'll have to surround myself with a guard of reliable men, if they keep this up," he muttered, glaring at the oncoming rabble. "And no doubt they'll expect pay for the hour they'll lose in coming up here. We mine-owners will have to ship the whole outfit, and get other men from Denver. That's what they'll drive us to with their nonsense about shorter hours and bigger wages. Confound them! If they want to get up in the world, why can't they work like reliable, decent men, and get something with which to lift themselves? They'll never do it by spending all their earnings in the saloons, and everlastingly talking about the hardships of the laboring man! Every man must first help himself. That's my experience."

The straggling body of workmen came steadily on, but with an awkward, purposeless air which showed they were not quite agreed as to what they should ask, and had no organization or leader.

As they neared the office, Taggart assumed his blandest, oiliest manner, and went out on the little veranda to greet them.

When he appeared, they halted irresolutely, and huddled like a flock of sheep that has become separated from the bell-wether.

"What can I do for you, my men?" he queried, wreathing his face in smiles.

At this, one of the boldest of the discontented band, a rough, shaggy-bearded miner, advanced and doffed his shabby hat.

"Yer must know wot we're after, Mr. Taggart, 'thout a-reequirin' of anybody to tell yer. It's a dog's work we're a-doin' fer ye, an' we're a-gittin' dogs' pay. We don't feel like standin' of it much longer!"

Taggart assumed a patronizing look that must have been trying to the self-reliance of the speaker.

"But the time you gave me to consider the matter isn't up! I was to have a week at the least. Naturally, I am anxious to do all I can for you, and will do all I can, as I promised you. But, my good fellows, you must give me time. You say I am making a fortune out of your labor. I wish I were. You must remember, though, that the mine and the smelters and everything else I have here has cost me very heavily. As soon as I get even and can afford it, I shall gladly listen to your request for shorter hours and better pay."

He was proceeding in this strain, when the big miner interrupted him with a snort of disgust and disbelief.

"How kin yer build houses like that, then?" pointing a knobby forefinger at the residence lately erected by Taggart. "Them kind of things, with bay winders and piazzas and flub-dubs don't look much like hard times, them don't. Answer me that, will yer? How kin ye 'ford to build 'em?"

At this a howl went up to the effect that the house represented the stolen earnings, the blood and sweat and toil of the howlers, who were being crushed and ground into powder beneath the iron heel of capital.

"Gentlemen," said the pacificatory Taggart, drawing himself up with an injured air, "your acts and expressions pain while they astonish me. On your previous visit I informed you that a committee of mine-owners and others interested in the welfare of our beautiful and prosperous little city, were considering how the burdens of which you complain might be alleviated. They have been making certain investigations, and those investigations have not yet been concluded. Until that is done, it would be impolitic, if not impossible, for me to give a definite answer to your questions."

"That committee will be ready to report in a few days, and I shall then know what to say to you. Whatever other mine-owners agree on, I shall of course be compelled to accede to; and it will give me the liveliest pleasure to know they have favored your demands. Till then I must ask that you return to work."

Taggart could threaten as well as cajole, and his tones now acquired a sternness that had a depressing effect on several of the malcontents.

"The week you gave me for consideration has but half expired, and your action, this evening, gentlemen, borders on insult. Always recollect that I have promised to do the best I can by you, and that bullying will effect nothing."

The more irresolute had begun to cower, when a sudden interruption brought his stream of talk to a close.

A heavy Concord stage, drawn by four straining horses, dashed furiously up the street, and came to a stand-still in front of the office. The horses, the vehicle and the driver were covered with gouts of mud, thrown by the wheels and the thundering hoofs.

The red-shirted men gave way before this rush, but closed instantly around the coach when it came to a stop.

Then the driver leaped from the box, the passengers tumbled from the inside, and the cry arose that the stage had been held up by road-agents and robbed.

"Make way there, will you?" said Taggart. "I understand there is a gentleman hurt. Get him out and carry him up to my house!"

The commands were instantly obeyed, and a gentleman with a pale face and a bandaged arm was assisted from the vehicle.

"Take him to the house," commanded Taggart, with a wave of the hand.

Then he turned to the men who had been besieging him:

"There will have to be a wait, now, my dear fellows. I had eight thousand dollars in this stage, and, as I understand, the road-agents got every cent. You can't expect me to raise wages for at least a few days after that!"

The lurch of the stage, as it again started, drowned some of this, but the miners understood its full import, and, with black looks and angry mutterings, they watched him, as he wheeled away and rapidly climbed the hill toward the house.

CHAPTER II.

THE STRANGER'S STORY.

The broker overtook the stranger before the house was gained, for the wounded man, assisted by a fellow passenger, had been proceeding very leisurely.

"I trust your hurts are not serious," said Taggart, with apparent interest and sympathy, as he flung open the outer door, and helped the man into the spacious guest chamber.

"Very slight," the stranger replied, as he reclined in the depths of the soft upholstered chair, which, as freights were terribly exorbitant, must have cost almost its weight in silver to get it there. "I have lost some blood, and that has weakened me. I'm sure a little rest will make me all right again."

There were strong lines in the white and bloodless face, lines indicating firmness, inflexibility of purpose, and intense energy in execution. The features were handsome, too, though their outlines were somewhat irregular. A brown mustache shaded the resolute mouth, and penetrating, dark eyes looked searchingly from beneath a massive, cliff-like brow.

The stage passenger, with a few murmured words of kindness, had bowed himself out, promising to return as soon as he could conveniently, and Taggart now dropped into a chair by the window, and not far from the injured man.

"Can I not help you in some way?" he questioned. "It's your arm that's hurt? Perhaps it needs re-dressing!"

"It has been well attended to. If you have some spirits, though, a small quantity would, I think, lend me strength."

"How thoughtless of me!" and the broker hastened into an adjoining room, coming back soon with a flask of brandy, a pitcher of water, and some glasses.

A small quantity of the brandy and water sipped, brought some color into the pale cheeks; and then, as he would not go to bed, he proceeded to detail the experiences of his trip, giving a graphic account of the trouble with the road-agents:

"It was a rough journey," he began. Then stopped.

"By the way, I haven't learned the name of the gentleman to whom I'm so much indebted."

At this, Taggart introduced himself.

"And my name is Kennedy—Charles Kennedy, though I'm oftener called Kansas Karl.

"As I was saying, it was a rough journey. That hundred miles of staging through the mountains was terrible. I've often heard of the horror of Mosquito Pass in winter, but it seems to me it couldn't be much worse than in this muddy springtime."

"It's tough," affirmed Taggart. "I've been through it at all seasons. As you say, that mountain trip is terrible. One freezes in the winter, is smothered with dust in the summer, and drowned with mud at the other seasons. Yet that don't keep people away; and they seem to be coming now faster than ever. But go on with your story. Perhaps you'd like another sip of the brandy?"

"It was a pleasant journey in some respects, though. There was one of the handsomest ladies in the stage it has ever been my good fortune to meet!"

"Ah!" and there was a significant uplifting of the eyebrows, for Taggart was an admirer of pretty women.

"I can't describe her beauty. She had the form of a Hebe, lustrous eyes, and a graciousness which was as much a part of her as her hair."

"Which was probably false. These women make up like actresses, Mr. Kennedy."

"Of course I admired her greatly," Kansas Karl went on, not heeding the disparaging comment. "But I had no opportunity of becoming acquainted with her until the appearance of the road-agents; and even then I didn't learn any more than that her name is Marsden, and that she hails from Denver."

"The rascals appeared suddenly from the cover of a bit of heavy pine woods, and almost before we were aware of it they had the stage surrounded and covered with rifles. It seemed useless to attempt a resistance; but I didn't fancy the idea of pitching my hands up at the order of any man, and so called on the others to defend themselves, at the same time drawing my revolver and firing a couple of shots.

"As I did it a small, lithe fellow, who was nearest me, pitched his rifle to his face and gave me a ball through the arm. It was a dastardly shot, and seeing that the other gentlemen in the stage did not wish to offer fight, and that flying bullets would endanger the life of the lady, I dropped my revolver in token of my submission."

"Now get out of there, every one of you!" commanded the fellow who had pulled the rifle on me. "Get out, and be quick about it. And if there's any other fool in there desirous of a bullet, let him put a hand on his weapons."

"I didn't like that kind of talk. But, what was I to do? The other passengers were climbing out and arranging themselves in a line on the bluff with their hands pointing skyward; my arm was bleeding copiously, and I felt my strength constantly weakening, and besides, there was the lady!"

"I couldn't do anything. So I pocketed my indignation and climbed out with the others, after first assisting the lady to alight."

"After that it was the old, old story. They rifled the mail-bags and the Express packages, took everything we had of value, including the lady's purse—for which act of vandalism I'll never forgive them—and then ordered us back

into the coach and told the driver not to draw rein until the town was gained, on peril of his life.

"But when I was being helped into the stage—the blood was dripping from my sleeve, and all could see that I was wounded—I fell prostrate. The stage jolted away; but the lady and some gentlemen came to my aid, and while one of them held me off the floor of the bouncing vehicle, she deftly bandaged my arm. Then she made a pillow of some wraps, and half-supported me until the town was reached."

His dark eyes lighted as he recalled the kindness.

"I tell you she's a jewel! and I'd like to know more of her."

"It won't be difficult," said Taggart. "I'd like to call on her, just to satisfy my curiosity concerning the wonderful beauty you speak of. You'll not be able to leave the house for some time, and it will give a splendid opportunity. I can call as the bearer of your thanks and compliments."

He stroked his beardless face thoughtfully.

"I suppose you don't know whether she's married or single?"

"No! I don't know anything of her history."

"If my daughter were only here, I'd go now," and Taggart looked his interest.

"You lost some money by the robbery?" Kennedy questioned, not pleased by the too evident alacrity of the other and wishing to change the drift of the conversation.

"Yes. Eight thousand dollars!"

He frowned as he recurred to the magnitude of the sum.

"I don't see why the stage companies don't put guards on the stage! This sort of thing has been going on at intervals ever since the rush began. That eight thousand was intrusted to an Express company, and I'm going to see if they can't be made to pay it. And the authorities here, too, are just as bad. They might wipe out these brigands, if they only would."

"I fancy it would be a pretty large contract," averred Kennedy, with a disbelieving shrug. "Those fellows were well armed and fearless; and no doubt they have places of retreat that are almost undiscoverable. Still, as you say, some attempt ought to be made to break them up."

The dark eyes watched Taggart narrowly while the assertion was being made. The latter caught the look and wondered at it.

"It could be done. That's been my belief for a long time."

He glanced at his watch, and smiled.

"If you'll excuse me, I'll call on the lady, be she miss or madame. I'll carry your thanks, etc., and that will, I doubt not, gain me a hearty welcome. My daughter will not be home for an hour or more, and I'll be back long before the expiration of that time. If you like, I'll send in a miner to watch by you. I can see that you're worn out, as well as weak, and sleep would do you good."

Kennedy could find no excuse to detain him further, so consented to the arrangement, saying, however, that he needed no one to watch by him, but preferred to be alone. But when the broker departed, his eyes followed the retreating form with looks of kindling jealousy.

CHAPTER III.

TRESSIE TAGGART.

KANSAS KARL, when left thus alone, dropped into a thoughtful state, and sat for a long time in an indolent, reclining position, staring at the landscape revealed through the window.

"This will never do," he declared at last, withdrawing his gaze and endeavoring to compose himself for a nap. "I'm thinking myself into a fever."

He threw his handkerchief over his face to aid in shutting out the sights and thoughts that troubled him. But he soon began to toss restlessly. Finally he cast aside the smothering handkerchief, and straightened up in the chair.

"I must follow up the advantage I have obtained and make the woman's acquaintance. I hope Taggart will obtain some definite information regarding her."

"But pshaw! What an idiot I am to let a pretty face and a queenly form take away my sense, in this way! The woman's not young either, though no doubt she would consider it scandal to breathe such a thought. But she's a superb creature, nevertheless; and if she is a little older than she once was, she manages to conceal the disagreeable fact pretty well."

He pulled nervously at his mustache and once more lapsed into silence. When he spoke again it was apparently on another theme.

"It will be too bad, now, if the fellow isn't here! He must be, though. I got my information pretty straight. Well! Well! Murder will out at last, though it takes a fearfully long time in many cases to bring about that consummation. It's been upwards of twenty years, I guess, since the black deed was committed. Twenty long years! Truly the mills of the gods grind slowly."

"And it was a mere accident, too, that put me on the trail! One of those singular chances that will sometimes occur contrary to all rule. My most excellent Denver friend had no idea he was

giving me information that I had long been seeking when he casually remarked that he believed the famous gambler, Buck Tolliver, was masquerading in Leadville. I didn't tell him what I believed concerning Tolliver. Why should I? I'm not certain of it, myself."

"If Tolliver is here, however, and he's the fellow I think he is, it will be worthy a goodly sum if I succeed in laying him by the heels. And not only that, but it will be visiting merited justice on the head of the greatest scoundrel that ever disgraced the West. Twenty years! It's a long time to escape punishment for such a crime."

He had drifted deep into reflections like these, when he heard Taggart's footsteps on the walk outside.

A little later the broker entered; and smiled as he noted Kennedy's look of anxious inquiry.

"She's as beautiful as you said," he commented, sinking again into the chair by the window. "If I was a younger man I've no doubt I'd go to raving and quoting poetry about her. As splendid a piece of femininity as I ever saw under the shining canopy. And as womanly and charming, too."

"Yes; I delivered your message. You should have seen her eyes light up when she understood that I came from you! It made her almost angelic."

He had rattled on, without noting the frown that shadowed Kennedy's face.

"Any information?" the latter questioned.

"Very little. You see, I couldn't ask her right out all about herself and her history, however much I would have liked to. Her name though, is Irene Marsden, and she is a madame. One of her visiting cards was lying on the table of the room into which I was shown, and that much I gathered before she appeared."

"Madame!" exclaimed Kennedy, in a reflecting tone.

"Yes," put in Taggart. "You see that don't tell much. She may be a married woman or she may be a widow. I wanted to question her on that point the worst kind."

"But, I see that my daughter is coming! Will you wish to meet her here, or wait till dinner?"

Kansas Karl signified his willingness to meet the young lady, or girl as she might prove to be, where he was and at once; and when she entered the house, Taggart called to her and gave her an introduction to his newly-made friend.

The wounded man's eyes opened to their fullest extent as they fell on this young lady, for she was young, and evidently a lady in the fullest sense of that much-abused term.

Compared with the radiant beauty of Madame Marsden her loveliness was like that of the violet set in juxtaposition to the brilliance and color of the tiger lily. But in her way, which was of the quiet, modest kind, she was fully as beautiful as the woman Kennedy had so admired in the stage.

Her father had called her Tressie, a shortening, as he explained, of the old and beloved name of Theresa; and Kennedy thought it fitted well. Theresa! There was a restful sound about it. Restful, as bad been her brief presence; for, after acknowledging the introduction, she had gone almost immediately to her room.

"My wife is dead!" Taggart explained, interpreting the look that had come to the face of Kennedy. "She died when Tressie was only a baby. We are all alone here, Tressie and I, except for the servants, of which we try to keep quite a number, though there is so much wild excitement about that they are hard to get hold of and harder to retain."

For his surroundings, Taggart was ultra-fashionable; and his dinner hour came at the time when his workmen and most of his neighbors were eating what they called supper. Kansas Karl had so recovered his strength that he announced his ability to accompany his host into the dining-room.

Everything was astonishingly sumptuous for the time and place, and had the dissatisfied miners been permitted to peep into that dining-room their anger and discontent would have increased a hundred fold.

Tressie presided with rare grace and tact. Taggart was witty and entertainingly talkative. The servants were the best of their class. Kennedy was charmed and flattered; and with so pleased with himself, his surroundings, and the delicacies afforded by the table, that he lent himself to many quips and jests and narrations of "moving adventures by field and flood."

On this evening he excelled as a talker, though he usually called himself the quietest and most taciturn of men. His wit, stimulated perhaps by the delicate aroma of the wine, flowed and sparkled like a stream. One would never have supposed that that very day he had been helped into the house by a fellow-traveler because of a wound that had seemed to sap the very fountains of his life.

After dinner he spoke of looking up a hotel, saying he had no claim on the further good offices of his kind host, and that he was well enough now to take care of himself. But to this Taggart would not listen.

"You are not half as well as you think you are. And besides, I am glad to have some one

to talk to. My business absorbs me, usually, and it is not often I have the opportunity or the time to talk at leisure to a gentleman of intelligence. You will be defrauding me of a real enjoyment if you go away, now. When you are better, I shall of course offer no objection. But now I shall not consent to anything of the kind."

These protests, linked with his own desires, proved all-potent, and after a turn about the inclosure dignified by the name of garden, listening the while to the music of Tressie's voice, they returned to the house and dropped again into the stream of conversation which the dinner had in a measure interrupted.

Then came an hour or two of games in the parlor, and some simple songs with piano accompaniment by Tressie; and when the wayfarer laid his tired head to rest on the downy pillows in the pretty little bed-chamber which had been assigned him, his dreams were rather of Taggart's lovely daughter than of the dashing, spirited woman who had become known as Madame Irene Marsden.

CHAPTER IV.

A JEWELLED SERPENT.

"It's a fine day's work all around, Philip, and you deserve especial credit!"

Madame Irene Marsden smiled into the dark face of the youth who was bending over her.

It was the afternoon of the day of the stage robbery. Immediately on leaving the stage she had gone to one of the best hotels in the place and engaged a suite of rooms; and it was in one of these rooms that the above compliment was expressed.

As she sat there, with that smile lighting her dark eyes, she was indeed a lovely woman. Not as young as she had been, as Taggart had gallantly phrased it, but young enough to be able to conceal the ravages of time to a great extent. It is difficult and even hazardous to guess at the ages of such women. She might have left the forty-fifth milestone far behind her, though she scarcely looked thirty. There was consummate art displayed in the arrangement of her toilet, and in the application of all those mysterious accessories with which many women bridge the gulf of advancing years and bind themselves to their earlier beauty. And she had tricks of statuesque posing and of sinuous and willowy movements that aided her not a little in the simulation of girlish freshness and loveliness.

The youth who was bending over her could not have been twenty-one, yet there was a wonderful exhibition of manly strength and courage in the fine, dark face and black eyes. He was evidently of southern birth or extraction, and the people of far southern lands are noted for early development. Hence, in spite of his smooth face, one would not have been inclined to call him a boy.

"A fine day's work!" she repeated, looking gloatingly at the hoard of riches heaped on the table before them. "I don't know when you have done better."

At the repetition of the compliment the youth displayed a double row of pearly, white teeth.

"Do you think you can get away with it all?" he asked, looking also at the treasure piled on the table. "There's a big lump of money in that, if it's properly handled."

He ran his hand covetously through the pile, which consisted principally of gold rings, ornaments and watches, together with weapons of every style and manufacture.

"There ought to be a thousand dollars' worth of truck, at a rough guess."

"It depends somewhat on the mood in which I may find the 'General.' If he got away with the last and made a good profit from it, he'll be as generous as his stingy nature will let him be. But not otherwise. A losing venture always makes him close and stubborn."

"But you haven't told me what the balance of the amount obtained is? It must have been good, though, from appearances."

"Yes, it was. Five thousand, besides the eight thousand that Taggart had with the Express company. As you say, it was a fine day's work! And we've got it all safely stowed, too."

The madame smiled again.

It was evident that the two thoroughly understood each other, and were co-workers in villainy.

"What made you save that rascal, when I had my gun drawn on him that way?" he demanded after a pause, and with some asperity. "He couldn't have escaped, if you hadn't given him that push just as I pulled the trigger. Those shots threw him right into our hands, and made my action the most natural thing in the world."

"My dear Velpeau," she cried, addressing him by his surname, "I am still older than you, and I hope you will therefore give me credit for a proper amount of judgment and discretion. Of course you could have killed him. But I didn't choose that you should. In the first place I didn't want you to commit useless murder, and by so doing have the bloodhounds of the law at your heels. You know what he is, and therefore know that his killing would have been the signal for throwing a hundred detectives into these hills; and it's a great deal easier to fight

one than a hundred, even if that one is a master of his art.

"Besides I have other reasons that I don't know that I can make you comprehend. He has come here to destroy the Canyon Cohorts; and I want to show him that he has undertaken a job he will have some trouble in completing. I feel that I should like to match my wit and skill against his, and make him realize how empty have been his boastings. Then, when he knows to whom his ruin is due, he may curse himself and die."

She never sullied her face or risked her beauty by indulging in frowns, but at this diabolical expression a shadow seemed to hover for an instant in her eyes.

"When I have him at my feet, Philip, meshed like the fly in the smothering web, I want to point him to his doom and let him know to whom he is indebted for it all. That is something worth striving for!"

"Seems to me it would have been safer for the band to have finished him out there and ended it," and Philip Velpau's dark face bore a trace of uneasiness. "I don't believe in playing with edged tools. Still, I suppose you know your own business best, though I must say my present state of enlightenment will not let me agree with you."

"Trust me for everything," she commanded sweetly. "I've done a good deal of the planning for the Cohort, and haven't made many mistakes. I will take care of our good detective friend, Kansas Karl. Such care that he will fall when he least expects it."

"He's at Taggart's, I understand."

"Yes," said the madame, "so they tell me. In fact I saw him taken there."

She leaned back in her seat and uttered a silvery laugh.

"I've no doubt he's raving about me this instant. Such kindness as I showed the poor fellow! That ugly wound you gave him I bound up with strips torn from my best kerchief, and wet with my tears. Philip, I cried over him like a fountain, or a mother. You should have witnessed it. And then I held his head and soothed him in a way that was absolutely beautiful. I'll warrant that in all his wanderings he never saw another such kind-hearted creature."

The laugh was contagious, and Velpau joined in it heartily.

"You're a wonderful woman!" he said.

"Taggart brought Kansas Karl's thanks and compliments to me awhile ago. It seems too funny for belief. The great detective snared at the very threshold of his work!"

"And Taggart! There's another fool for you, Velpau. A most egregious blockhead, though he thinks he's sharp as needles."

"I don't like him," Velpau declared, with a scowl that brought a second silvery peal from the lips of the madame.

"You ought to make love to the girl," she averred, after another survey of the rich booty Velpau had brought her. "She couldn't resist the jewels you might offer. Such things catch the best of them."

"She's not my style," replied Velpau, dryly.

"Oh!" and the madame tapped her dainty foot against the yielding carpet. "You needn't keep your lemon, though, when you've squeezed it dry."

"No! I haven't time for such nonsense. The Cohort gives me all I care to look after. Such an ungracious set of dogs was never seen. They almost raised a row to-day over the division of the spoils. I'll have to shoot a couple of them before I teach them that I'm their master."

"An uneducated rascal is a consummate idiot! But we have to have them, Philip. The Cohort isn't any too strong just now, either. Better not shoot any of them yet awhile, if you are not driven to it, though of course you *must* maintain your authority. Rather make them understand that they are helpless without you."

"If it can be done!"

"Oh, it can be done. There isn't any question about that. I think they appreciate that fact pretty well, already. Keep a firm grip on the reins, and you're all right. If the water gets too deep for you, come to me for aid. I can teach them a trick or two, should it be needed."

"I'll keep you posted about everything," he promised, and then took up his hat to depart. "Screw the general down as tight as you can."

"Trust me for that, my dear Philip!"

She kissed her finger-tips to him as he passed through the doorway, and when the sounds of his footsteps had died out, turned again to the contemplation of the valuables spread on the table, and which Velpau and his band had that day taken from the ill-fated passengers of the stage.

CHAPTER V.

"THE GENERAL'S TENT."

AMONG the lower class of drinking-dens of the town was the obscure dive known as "The General's Tent." It was kept by Joe Schermann, who, because of his name and nationality, was sometimes known as "Dutch Joe," and sometimes as "The General."

In a little back room of this dive a number of men were grouped about a card-table. A flask

of whiskey stood on a convenient shelf, and from this they helped themselves at intervals, setting the flask down with a long-drawn sigh when it had been at last removed from the reluctant lips.

One of the men thus engaged merits especial attention. He was of medium height, yet with a certain gauntness that made him seem much taller than he really was. A stubby beard clothed his face, and his long mustachios had a fierce downward and backward sweep, that gave to his features the wild aspect of a Spanish bandit. A pair of murderous-looking revolvers were held in place by a wide belt of leather clasped around his waist, which gave support also to a long, keen knife. Altogether he was a man to command a certain sort of respect, if not admiration.

What his real name was few knew or thought to ask. He was known as Socorro Sam, and had been in turn miner, cowboy, scout and prospector since the days of his boyhood.

In spite of his wild aspect Socorro Sam had a multitude of friends, not only in Leadville but throughout the entire Rocky Mountain region; and men do not gain and hold friends unless there is something in their character that is attractive, if not noble.

The other members of the group were less striking in appearance, though one of them, a Mexican, was given a somewhat gaudy air by the brightly-striped blanket which he wore over his shoulders and head, Indian fashion.

The game was lively and interesting, though the stakes were not large. It does not always require large stakes to make a game of cards absorbing, and these men shouted and cursed and laughed over their small gains and losses as others might have done at the shifting of thousands.

Suddenly there arose a cry of fraud. The charge had been made by Socorro Sam, who sat now with dilated eyes, glaring at the man who was accused.

"That card never come out o' the deck!" he asserted, dropping a hand to the guard of his knife.

The accused was the Mexican.

He threw off the enveloping blanket, and, in apparent expectation of a shot, dropped agilely to the floor and dived beneath the table.

"The senor lies!" he hissed, as he slipped from the chair. Then, before Socorro Sam knew what to expect, he wriggled from beneath the table at the opposite side, and attacked the latter with the fury of a tiger.

Socorro's knife was in his hand. The Mexican was armed in the same manner, and a terrific combat instantly ensued. The table was overturned, chairs were upset, and the struggling combatants staggering against the wall, the shelf was crushed and the brandy flask emptied its precious contents on the floor.

The others composing the card party were crowding and crouching in the corners, watching for an opportunity of making their exits, and fearful lest bullets should begin to fly in the usual murderous fashion that marked the progress of a fight.

At this crisis the door communicating with the rear of the place was thrown open and the "General" waddled in, accompanied by a vailed woman.

The proprietor was very much excited and incensed, and German maledictions flew thick and fast from his sputtering lips. As for the woman she seemed very calm and serene for the time and occasion.

With a lithe, quick movement, she glided toward the combatants circling nimbly around them as they wheeled and dipped and struggled in vain efforts to get the advantage of each other. Suddenly she made a hawk-like dive, tore the waving knife from the hand of Socorro Sam, and grasped the Mexican by his streaming hair.

"Come to my aid, you cowards!" she screamed at the men who were crouching in the corners. "There will be murder here, if you don't."

Thus aroused they sprung to her assistance, quickly separated the angry and panting fighters, and prevented them from again rushing at each other.

"Dot vhas goot!" cried the approving General, reaching for the knives that had been tossed to the floor. "Holt dhem so yoost a liddle whiles, vhill you? Dhen you may gick 'em vhum de street outd."

"No you don't, you old Dutch thief!" yelled Socorro, stopping his frantic rushes for an instant as he divined the General's intention. "You don't git that knife, you bet! That's too good a knife to go where you'll send it. Drop it, or by the great Sam Bass I'll put a hole through you as soon as I git loose."

There was no mistaking the tone in which this was uttered, and Dutch Joe recoiled as if the ping of the threatened bullet were already ringing in his ears.

"I vhas only going to dake gare uff dhem vor you," he protested, lifting his hands skyward in indications of innocence. "Mine Gott! dot man vhas vly ad a whellers as eef he vhas a roat-agent. Dthose knives ain'd vort peekin' vrom de dredub ub!"

Socorro was again making desperate dashes and writhing in an effort to escape from the detaining hands. The Mexican, when seized in that manner by the hair, had ceased all efforts, and stood with folded arms awaiting the issue. He presented a comic, though rather statuesque, appearance, with head drawn back by the grasp of the woman's hand on his hair, lips parted, and chest rising and falling under his hurried respirations.

"Throw him out of the door!" the woman commanded, speaking to the men who were striving with Socorro Sam. "Pitch the fool out head-first, if he won't listen to reason."

Thus ordered, the men pushed the straining and half-drunk fellow to the entrance and bundled him into the back alley.

"Now get down in the corners," she cried with marvelous promptness, and the men sprawled themselves on the floor, believing the ejected man would fire a volley of shots through the door.

But, nothing of the kind occurred. They heard him stagger to his feet, and move slowly away.

In a little while he came back, though, and bawled out a demand for his knife.

This was taken to him, by one of the recent card party.

After that silence reigned for several minutes, and then the men left the place, one at a time, and by the back entrance, the Mexican being the last to go.

"The fools are all gone," she said, throwing back the vail and revealing the handsome features of Madame Marsden. "Now, we can get down to business. I half wished they had killed that Socorro Sam. But I saw, as soon as I entered the room, that he had the Mexican by the throat and that the latter had no earthly chance, otherwise I should not have interfered. But we can't afford to lose any men; and though Pedro isn't the best fellow in the world for our line, we couldn't well spare him. Those others were all my boys, were they not?"

The German nodded a grave assent.

"I thought so, and I don't see why they didn't double on Socorro and measure him for a lot in the cemetery! The cowards were afraid of him, I suspect."

Dutch Joe nodded again.

"He is a vighter!" he declared, with a long inspiration and a sigh that resembled the cough of a high-pressure engine. "You pet me dot man vhas a yaller tog mit a vnull deam under der vagon. He gan vhip a dozen road-achents like dem!"

The madame's lip curled contemptuously.

"And yet when they tried they held him very easily. I'm much afraid, General, you're quite as big a coward as any of them." She glanced uneasily toward the door communicating with the front of the building.

"Nopody in dhre! Id vhas too lade. Puddy near morning, I dhinks me, and plack as plack puzzi cats oudtsite. Dthese whellers vhas sday pehint to blay a liddle, vhat you vhint here!"

"You shouldn't have permitted it," she declared, imperiously. "Our boys shouldn't know too much about our affairs. Of course they didn't discover anything, but it gives them a good chance to suspect, and that tends to jealousy and insubordination. And then there was Socorro; you ought to have sent him away long ago."

"How vhas I do know dot you vhas goimg?" the General queried. "Mine gootness! I vhas nod a newsbabber dot I might know eferyt'ing."

"The fact that we made a haul yesterday should have been sufficient warning. I hope you'll remember that in the future."

She arose and left the room, returning soon with a heavy bundle, which she deposited carefully on the floor.

The eyes of the German sparkled greedily, for he knew what the bundle contained.

When she lifted the package to pour its contents on the table, he hovered over it; and when the jewelry, the watches, the rings and ornaments, glittered and sparkled in the dim light, his face became almost fiendish in its intense covetousness.

"You'll have to put good figures on these, General!" she declared, watching him furtively from beneath her dark brows. "If you don't I shall take them to Denver, and dispose of them there. Those are worth a pile of money."

"Oh, mine gootness! No. Dthose vhas de very cheapest uff maderials. Nod vhum uff dthose vatches vhas pure golt. Und dthose tiamond-rings vhas made efer yhum uff glass. So hellup me gracious, dot is so!"

"Very well, then!" and she began to gather them up and return them to the bundle. "You're not obliged to take them, you know. If you want a bargain, I'm ready to offer it; but I'm not going to give the things to you."

A groan of anguish escaped him.

"We ought to understand each other by this time, Joe. I know what those things are worth as well as you do. They'll bring you fifteen hundred or two thousand dollars. Give me seven hundred, and they're yours. I'm not going to haggle long, for it's nearly morning."

The German groaned again, and then began an inventory and memoranda in a dirty day-

book which he drew from some mysterious pocket.

"Fife hoonert!" he whispered, when the inventory and calculations were finished. "Dot is twice what they're vort."

"Seven hundred!" said the madame, inflexibly.

"Six hoonert!" gurgled Joe, struggling with his greed, and yet knowing that in the end he must yield. "Dot vhas be de ruin uff me, alre'rry. Six hoonert. Dhey vhas nod vort a cend more as six hoonert."

"Seven!" declared the madame, imperturbably. "Seven hundred, or they go to Denver!"

"Mine gootness, vhat a womans!" mopping the sweat from his flaming, red face. "She vhas sure break me oop."

"You don't want them, I see," and she began shoving them into the receptacle with great rapidity. "Very well. I can't talk all night."

"Yes! Yes! Sefen! But I vhas a ruint man vhrom dhis nighd!" and the German buried his face in his hands and groaned dolorously.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SONG OF THE SIREN.

KANSAS KARL recovered rapidly from the effects of the gun-shot wound in the arm, and in a day or two began to feel like his old self. The wound was not a serious one—though it had caused great effusion of blood—and hence healed speedily.

Taggart would not consent for him to leave the house, however, until he had been completely restored; and Kansas Karl, charmed by the quiet goodness and sweetness of Tressie, suffered himself to be persuaded into remaining until he felt that he really had no further excuse for so doing.

On the second day after his arrival in the town he bent his steps toward the hotel at which Taggart had informed him Madame Marsden had engaged a suite of rooms, and where she was living in some state surrounded by a number of servants.

The madame was something of an enigma to the detective, and all he had heard of her served to increase rather than diminish the air of mystery which seemed to cling about her and attend her every movement. He wondered what she was doing in this wild town, so far from the refinements that make life pleasant for women of her apparent class. Not once did he suspect the real truth, that she was in some sense the head of the notorious band that was harassing the stages and wagon trains and making the long journey through the mountains one of constant alarm and peril.

On arriving at the hotel he sent up his card and waited in the cozy office for an answer.

The answer came soon:

"She would be most happy to meet Mr. Kennedy; and asked that he come at once to her apartments."

So the great detective followed the call-boy up the flights of stairs, and was shown into the rooms of the robber queen.

She had evidently been expecting the visit, and was arrayed in such dazzling splendor and looked altogether as lovely that Kansas Karl was quite intoxicated by the vision that burst upon him. He had never seen, he told himself, so superb a creature. She was even more beautiful than Tressie, if two such opposites might be compared, though there did not emanate from her that restful, lulling and quieting influence one always felt in the presence of Taggart's daughter.

She was alone, and as he entered she arose and sweetly bade him welcome, and placed his hat away with her own hands. Nor during the entire time of his visit did she once call a servant.

"You are recovering?" she questioned, in a tone which affirmed that he was. "I was afraid you were to have a serious time of it."

"Merely a flesh wound," he hastened to explain. "And besides the ball did not go straight through the arm, but rather grazed it!"

"And you have been stopping at—at—"

She hesitated as if the unfamiliar name had eluded her memory.

"At Mr. Taggart's? Yes. And I'm there still, though I expect to leave soon. In fact I should have gone before this, but he would not hear of it. I feel that I have gained a friend worth having in Mr. Taggart. He is a man of superior attainments and generous impulses; and but for the bullet of that road-agent I should never have known him. It's another illustration of the truth of the old assertion that good may come from evil."

He had determined on an effort to learn something of her position and history, and after a half-hour's talk on a variety of nonessential topics was able to approach the one nearest his heart. In that half-hour, also, they had come to feel as if they had known each other for years. At any rate that was his feeling toward her; and, judging from her words and actions, her apparent feeling toward him—though what her real thoughts were would have been impossible to ascertain.

"And so you are from Denver? I used to know a number of people there, though it's been

some years since I saw most of them. I have lately visited the place, however. Marsden! I don't recall the name?"

There was the largest kind of an interrogation point in the inflection.

"My husband, Thomas Marsden, was once in business there. Not on a large scale, so you would not have heard of him probably if you had even resided in the place at the same time."

"Very likely."

"He died several years ago," she said, casting down her dark eyes. "Some little business affairs brought me to Leadville. Not business connected with his estate, though that has troubled me a great deal. But some mining stocks I purchased with money coming to me as his widow."

She left her seat and moved across the room with her characteristic sinuous step to a small stand on which was an escritoire. This she opened, and took from it a bunch of papers tied neatly with a bit of ribbon.

"I know I ought not bother you with my affairs," she purred. "But I have so few to advise me, and you have been so kind."

"No bother at all!" he asserted. "It will be a pleasure to me if I can aid you in any way."

Thus reassured, she, with a little affectation of embarrassment, placed the papers in his hands.

"I ought to be ashamed of my ignorance, I know, but I must confess that I know so little about business. These are mining stocks. I purchased them in Denver, through a gentleman who assured me I could not possibly make a better investment. I haven't a great deal of property, and it's necessary that what I have should be bringing me an income. So I bought on his recommendation; and since I have been here it has been hinted to me that the stocks are valueless. If that is so, I do not know what I'm to do."

"I have some other property in the East, but it's tied up in a lawsuit. I've been told that if I only had money to fee the attorneys and do some other things that I don't clearly understand I can get that. Therefore, finding it impossible to sell these stocks in Denver, I decided to come here and make the attempt."

There was a pitiful air of helplessness in her words and manner that went straight to Kennedy's heart. It's so pleasant to have a pretty woman confide in you in that way, and speak as if your judgment were the sole bulwark on which she relied for protection.

He looked the papers over carefully. It needed but a glance to reveal their comparative worthlessness; yet he read and re-read them, hesitating to deal the blow that should shatter her hopes.

"I'm afraid you were grossly deceived by the gentleman who acted as your agent in the purchase of these," he faltered, when he could no longer find excuse for delaying a decision. "They are stocks in the Bluebird Mine, and the Bluebird failed hopelessly over a month ago. It was, as I understand, a fraud from its inception."

She clinched a white hand against her breast and grasped the table for support. Kennedy, watching her attentively, feared she was on the verge of a swoon. But she quickly recovered, and sunk with a trembling shudder into a chair. Had she given herself to the stage she would have attained high rank as an emotional actress. Kansas Karl was completely deceived; and believing her simulated agitation real, said:

"Of course there is a possibility that the failure of the mine may have been due to mismanagement rather than the absence of paying metal, in which case it is certain to be revived; and you may get your money, or a portion of it, after all."

He did not believe this, but it is easier to hold out false hopes than to utterly crush one who has been relying on a broken reed. Besides the rumors and reports of the utter worthlessness of the stocks might have been exaggerated, purposely or otherwise. He had no positive evidence of their truth.

This he hastened to say, glossing as much as he could the ugly belief he held.

"I will look into the matter at my earliest convenience and report," he declared. "It may be that I can obtain a purchaser for the stocks. It frequently happens that there are men who cling to an enterprise like that after all others have lost hope, and who persistently buy all the securities that are offered, thinking the final result will amply justify them. Perhaps I can find a man who feels thus toward the Bluebird."

"If you only could!" she implored. "If I'm not able to obtain anything for them, I really don't know what I shall do. What little money I have is fast dwindling."

Kansas Karl could not help thinking that she might live very well with a less extravagant outlay than was shown in her handsomely furnished apartments. But he knew there are women who have become so accustomed to all these luxuries and refinements that they regard them as actual necessities, and appearances indicated that Madame Marsden belonged to that unfortunate class—a class that has never learned to

do anything useful, and is utterly helpless when the supporting power of wealth is gone.

With many promises to do all he could, he took his departure, and walked slowly and thoughtfully down the street. The madame had appealed strongly to his sympathy and kindness of heart. Her evident distress had touched him deeply. Besides, he felt he owed her much for her help and sympathy on the stage. But he was not in love with her, as a short time before it seemed he might be. The fair, sweet face of Taggart's daughter interposed between him and that.

Neither was he in love with Tressie, he assured himself. Only, if he ever loved with that pure passion which leads to wedlock, he felt that the object of that affection must be such a one as he believed Tressie to be.

"The madame is a lovely creature, though," he muttered, "and I owe her more than I can ever pay. I'm much afraid, however, that if she ever sells those worthless papers I'll have to become the purchaser."

CHAPTER VII.

THE BLACK SPHINX.

KANSAS KARL had not been long in Leadville and had not yet permanently abandoned the pleasant quarters he had found at Taggart's, when he began the work which had brought him to the town. He had represented himself to Taggart as a prospective investor, who wished to thoroughly examine the ground before deciding on anything; and in this assumed character it was the most natural thing in the world that he should visit the principal mines and business places.

In this search he did not omit the saloons, for he was convinced that at such haunts his chances of stumbling against Buck Tolliver were greater than anywhere else. His best information concerning Tolliver represented the latter as a confirmed gambler, and every saloon had its gambling rooms attached.

Since entering the camp scraps of talk had floated to him in regard to a mysterious individual who always went masked, and who was known only as the Black Sphinx. The masked man was a gambler, and was usually to be found in gaming hours at a flashy saloon and gambling hell known as the Lode Star; and accordingly to the Lode Star Kansas Karl made his way.

For several nights the Sphinx did not make his appearance. Kansas Karl dared not question as to the cause, but, as the absence seemed to evoke no comment, he took it for granted that such absences on the part of the masked gambler were common occurrences.

The feeling that he was on the right track was so strong on him that he abandoned his other points of search and spent much of his time there, taking a part in the games now and then, for he wanted to become known in a manner to the *habitudes* of the place so that he might pit himself against the Sphinx whenever the latter concluded to once more show himself.

His visits were rewarded finally. Kansas Karl had entered late, and now found the man he had been so long seeking. The Sphinx was seated at a gaming-table at the further end of the long room, and was engaged in play with several well-known sports of the camp.

The detective concealed his pleasure thereat under a guise of indifference, and affected not to see the Sphinx, until a new acquaintance kindly pointed him out.

"There's a man you ought to pit yourself against. He's one of the finest card-players in the camp, and has won some big sums in here."

Thus directed, Kansas Karl looked straight at the strange individual. He was a well-formed man in the prime of manhood, so far as could be ascertained from the limited view that could be gained of his features. He was dressed entirely in black, without a single line of color to relieve the deadness and somberness of his apparel. His hands were also incased in black gloves, a pair of revolvers, every portion of which was ebonized, swung from his hips, and what could be seen of the knife which accompanied them was of the same jetty hue. The upper part of his face was hidden behind a black, silk mask. Below that was a well-turned nose, a dark mustache, and a firm chin.

"Quite a Mephistopheles in appearance," laughed Kansas Karl, as he completed his survey. "Who is he?"

"That I can't tell you. Some believe the proprietor knows all about him, but whether he does or not is an open question. He is never seen except at that gaming-table. And where he goes when he leaves it is uncertain. I've an idea, though, that he has rooms in the building."

Thanking his informant for telling him this much, he expressed a wish that he might find an opportunity to play against the mysterious personage, and then moved up the room until he came close to the card-table.

Just at this time one of the players becoming disgusted with his luck arose from the table, and the detective promptly pre-empted his seat. The Sphinx looked at the new-comer questioningly through the holes in his mask, but did not deign

a query. Then the cards were shuffled and cut, and the play recommenced.

The bets were not large, but sufficiently high to be stimulating; and it did not take Kansas Karl long to ascertain that the Black Sphinx was a master of the game. He never spoke a word except when necessary, and even then was very miserly of what he said.

The detective decided that the tones might be disguised, though there was little in the pronunciation to warrant this. The Sphinx's voice was low, but excellently modulated and no fault could be found in the pronunciation. Occasionally, when the man was excited it had a soft, purring sound that was suggestively disagreeable. But, that was all.

Kansas Karl considered himself fairly expert and blessed with more than an ordinary amount of what gamblers term luck. But on this occasion his luck seemed to have deserted him. He played on, however, and the conviction soon forced itself that the Black Sphinx was cheating, though, watch as closely as he might, he could not detect him in it.

"Luck's dead against me to-night!" he declared, at length, hoping to draw the Sphinx into conversation.

He was partly successful. The masked man laughed lightly, and uttered the gambler's proverb:

"The only thing sure about luck is that it's bound to change."

After that he became even more silent than ever, frequently indicating his desires by a wave of the gloved hands or a nod of the head.

Kansas Karl was losing too heavily to feel pleasant, and convinced that the cause of it was the cheating propensities of the Sphinx, and likewise anxious to draw the latter out and discover if possible who and what he really was, he determined to charge him with it to the teeth if the slightest pretext for so doing presented.

It came soon. The detective saw, or imagined he saw, the masked player draw a card from his sleeve:

"That's foul play!" Kansas Karl shouted, in a voice which could be heard all over the house. "I don't allow any man to ring in a cold deck on me. You pulled a card out of your sleeve just now, and I've no doubt there are plenty more where it came from."

The Sphinx's chin quivered under the accusation, and he dropped his hands quickly to the black revolvers. He would have followed the movement with a shot probably if the detective had not been too quick for him. With a lightning swiftness Kansas Karl pushed the table against and upon the gambler, bearing him irresistibly backward and downward. Then, before the Sphinx could recover, his adversary was upon him, attempting to clutch him by the throat and to tear away the concealing mask.

A fierce struggle ensued. The Mask tried to get out a revolver or knife, and the detective was equally determined to prevent it. Hence they fell together to the floor, where they rolled over and over. The greatest excitement instantly prevailed. Men shouted and called to each other, commands and curses flew thick and fast, and in the midst of all the proprietor and some followers hustled forward to quiet the disturbance and to clear the room.

Kansas Karl's animating thought, next to self-preservation, was to tear the mask from the Sphinx's face and thus ascertain who he was. This was a point, however, which the Sphinx kept well guarded, and every effort was consequently thwarted.

Suddenly the room was plunged in deepest gloom. Kansas Karl felt himself seized and pulled backward, received a violent blow on the head, and knew nothing. When he regained consciousness the lamps were blazing, and a crowd had gathered about him. But the Sphinx was gone. Scarcely a minute had elapsed, he felt sure, since he had received that stunning blow.

"Where is he?" he panted, rising to a sitting posture, and passing a hand across his face to learn the extent of his injuries.

"Who? The Sphinx?" asked a dozen voices.

"Who else could I be talking of?" he grated, struggling to his feet. "What became of him? Who put out the lamps?"

"Blest if we know," declared one, who advanced as spokesman. "We was all watchin' the fight, an' thinkin' of nothin' else, when all at once the lamps was out. We heerd some men running; and when we lit the lamps ag'in we found you here alone."

The story sounded improbable, but the man's face and manner showed he was speaking the truth.

The only explanation was that some ally or allies of the Sphinx had turned out the lights when the attention of all was drawn to the struggle on the floor. Then the Sphinx's friends had assaulted the detective and dragged their man away. The absence of the proprietor seemed to indicate that he was one of those thus engaged.

"I guess I am all right," said the detective, feeling the contusion on his face. "That won't improve my good looks, but there's nothing very serious about it."

"Mou't a' been a good deal wuss!" one of the

men observed. "Especially if the Black Sphinx had 'a' put 'that knife o' his into you when the lights went out."

The advance of the proprietor from the outside at this instant silenced the stream of talk that was commencing to flow, and turned the eyes and attention of all to him.

"A pretty sort of row you kicked up!" he said, severely.

"Where have you been?" Kansas Karl interrupted. "There are some queer things about this I'd like to have explained."

"I didn't know but *you* might know something about that. I'm blest if I do. Somebody put the lights out; then there was a rush from the room, and I was carried along just like a feather. The crowd thought there would be shooting when that reign of darkness commenced, and was in a hurry to *vamose*."

There was a look of great seriousness on his face, but Kansas Karl felt that it was assumed, and that the story of the proprietor was a lie out of the whole cloth.

The money that had been on the table when the fight began had disappeared, a chair or two had been broken, and the room was in great disorder.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" the man asked, as he commenced to put the furniture in place, directing his question to the detective.

There was an inflection in the query which said as plainly as words:

"Since you caused this trouble, you might as well get out of here, for your room is better than your company."

"Nothing!" the detective answered, understanding what the proprietor meant. "I think I'd better go home and go to bed."

CHAPTER VIII.

PISTOLS FOR TWO.

"HYER I am! The same ole chap—half hoss an' half alligator! Whar's the row? Somebody said there was a big fightin' goin' on down this-a-way! P'int me to it, will ye?"

The demand ended in a whoop that sent the scared echoes skurrying along the ghostly streets where the struggling moonbeams were battling with the gloomy shadows.

Any one having ever heard that voice could not fail to recognize its sharp, high-keyed intonations. It was the voice of Socorro Sam, the reckless fire-eater who was forever hunting a fight and championing the under dog in every difficulty, no matter what the cause or consequence might be.

"Won't somebody trot out the Shanghaies? Hyer's yer bantum. Cockalooral-ooral!"

And with a ludicrous imitation of the boastful strut of a rooster he swung around in front of the Lode Star.

Several men were gathered there, half crouching, as it seemed, in the shadow of the building, but these paid no heed to him. They had frequently heard his loud talk, perhaps, and were, therefore, little interested in it. His actions indicated that he had been drinking, and this may likewise have induced them to maintain silence.

But when Kansas Karl appeared in the doorway there was a stir in their midst. One of them advanced, and handed him a paper, as he halted for an instant in the glare of the lamps.

He hastily unfolded and read it, and then stepped further out.

What he had read was a challenge, signed by the Black Sphinx.

"I would have been better pleased if the gentleman had signed his real name," he said, glancing at the group in the gloom. "It would have been fairer and more chivalric. But I shall not complain. I am a little dizzy still from that blow some scoundrel gave me, but I don't know that that will matter. I haven't any one to act as second. Neither does that matter. Tell the Mephistophelean gentleman who calls himself the Black Sphinx, and who hasn't the courage or the honesty to show his face to the world as honest men are wont to do, that I am ready to meet him. And, as the challenged party, I name the time and place here and now, and the weapons, pistols, at twenty paces."

There was a promptness about all the detective did which was often bewildering to those who opposed him; and if on this occasion the Sphinx and his backers thought to see him cringe and avoid the conflict thus thrust on him they were sadly disappointed.

"More fightin'!" yelled Socorro, spinning around on one heel like an animated top. "Understan', gen'lemen, that there's a chip layin' on my shoulder, too. Won't some o' ye 'commodate me by knockin' of it off?"

He eyed the detective with owlish gravity, and then advanced with extended hand.

"Goin' it all alone, hey? Well, may I be e't up by mounting lions, if I don't stand by ye to the finish. Jist say the word, an' we'll sail into these fellers like a hundred hoss-power thrashin'-machine. P'int out the one that hit ye! P'int 'im out, an' I'll perceed to salivate him. One man ag'in' all them! Tain't no fair show, so it ain't! Whoop!"

And with this declaration he waved his fists belligerently toward the friends of the Sphinx.

The detective had never met Socorro Sam before, and so was at loss how to classify him. Might he not be a foe in disguise who wished by a pretended championship to bring about his downfall or death? He had known of such things.

But there was something in the very air and attitude of this boaster to disarm fear and suspicion, and Kansas Karl quickly decided that the man might be a braggart, but he was not a trickster.

"All I ask is that I'm given fair play," he said, in answer to Socorro's questions and declarations.

"Fair play!" the other shrieked. "That's what the bantum's been fightin' for sense the day he was hatched. You may jist bet I'll see to *that*, me noble dook! Likewise, should you fall with yer face to the foe, I'll see that yer will's probated and that yer grave's kep' green. The ordience is ready. Let the band begin to play."

He folded his arms across his breast, and placed himself in the attitude of an umpire.

"It's to be a duel with pistols," Karl explained. "Will you act as my second? There is no one else here that I feel safe in calling on."

Nothing could have pleased Socorro Sam better, and he indicated his readiness in his usual way.

At this Kansas Karl named him as his second; and calling him aside talked with him for a little while in a low and earnest manner.

Then Socorro Sam announced that his principal was ready, and walked away from the building to confer with the second of the Sphinx.

The arrangements were not complicated, and the conference was consequently of short duration. It was settled that as the duel was to be with revolvers each should use his own weapons; that they should be stationed back to back, walk ten paces, then wheel and fire at the word of command; and that the firing should only end when one or the other had fallen or announced that he was satisfied.

All this was made known by the second of the Black Sphinx, Socorro Sam listening closely to see that he did not misstate the terms.

The responsibility thus thrown on the half-intoxicated man had resulted in driving the brandy fumes almost completely from his brain, and in all that he did he acted with remarkable promptness and judgment. His creed caused him to favor Kansas Karl as being the weaker party; and in every word of conference or other act he jealously guarded the interests of his principal.

Until the moment when the declaration was made that everything was in readiness the Black Sphinx stood among his friends, speaking no word and showing no apparent interest in the affair that so nearly concerned him. Now he came forward with one of the ebonized revolvers in his hand, and was placed in position by his second.

Kansas Karl also advanced, but instead of a revolver he carried a small derringer which he had plucked from some concealed pocket.

When Socorro Sam saw the weapon he expostulated with him, and urged that it was foolish and suicidal to use it, inasmuch as it allowed of but one shot. But the detective was inflexible in this, smilingly informing Socorro that only one shot would be needed.

The proprietor of the Lode Star, together with the few men who had remained in the gaming room, had emerged when they learned that the duel was about to take place, and now stood quietly in the doorway, surveying the scene.

And it was a strange scene, but one the like of which the pale moon had often looked down on in its passage over the Great Divide. Especially was it a scene common in those early days of the wild Camp of the Carbonates, when every man carried his life in his hand and stood ready to defend it at a moment's warning.

Except for the groups gathered before the Lode Star the streets were deserted. Occasionally the hilarious song of some inebriated miner or workman making his way homeward jarred on the quiet air. Lights, however, gleamed along every thoroughfare, pointing out the lairs where the gambling thugs lay in wait for victims.

At the word of command Karl and the Sphinx, who had been placed back to back, stepped away from each other with firm tread; and when the ten paces were counted out, they wheeled and stood ready to fire when the word should be given.

It came immediately; and with apparently a single report, the deadly weapons belched their contents. The light was not the best possible for accurate firing, but with the sound of the shots the Black Sphinx threw up his hands and tumbled heavily to the earth.

Kansas Karl stood as if untouched.

"Killed him at the fu'st shot!" came in a hoarse whisper of astonishment from the lips of Socorro Sam.

The Sphinx's second and friends were hurrying forward, when Kansas Karl broke the awful silence that had settled on all:

"Hear me before you touch him! He is only stunned, and will recover in a short time. I

could have killed him if I had wished. You will find that my ball just grazed the right side of his head, making scarcely a mark in its passage."

As he made the statement he went forward with his second, believing that now had arrived the opportunity for discovering the Sphinx's identity.

He was doomed to disappointment. The hat of the prostrate man was removed by the second, but the mask was left in place.

"Take off that thing so's the crowd kin see!" demanded Socorro, pointing to the disguise. "Ef my friend hyer has made sich a shot as he says we want to look at the ev'dence."

Whether this was because he divined the wish that lay nearest the detective's heart, or was prompted only by curiosity, it would be difficult to determine. Probably the latter.

"I'm runnin' this side o' the game," the Sphinx's second responded curtly. "If the gen'leman d 'a' wanted it off, he'd 'a' took it off hisself 'fore the fight begun."

The curious and excited crowd gathered around the prostrate man and stared at the wound revealed by the removal of the hat. It was as Kansas Karl had stated. A light furrow had been cut along the skull, and from this furrow a tiny stream of blood was trickling. All knew that the wound could not be of a serious character. The concussion had produced instantaneous unconsciousness and felled the man like a lightning stroke. That was all.

Even as they looked, the Sphinx began to stir and mutter incoherently; and his second and friends demanded that he be conveyed into the bar-room, where his injury could be attended to in a proper manner.

This was at once done, and a portion of the throng streamed after. But the greater number remained outside to feast their eyes on the man who had shown so conclusively what a master he was with the deadly derringer. None of them spoke, except in respectful whispers to each other, but all looked their admiration and wonder, asking who he was and whence he had come. It was a kind of attention especially distasteful to a man of Kennedy's disposition, though it is the sort that feeds the vanity and self-love of the professional bruisers and pugilists.

"I suppose this will settle it?" he questioned of Socorro Sam, who had remained near him. "I don't want to seem to sneak away, but I'm satisfied our masked friend will not care to renew the fight when he comes around."

"Nary!" was Socorro's laconic answer. "He'd be a 'tarnal fool if he did. 'Tain't many men would want to stand up twic't 'fore a gun like that. I allus thought I was a purty good shot, myself, but I'm prepared to knock under after that, and whup any blame galoot what dares to insinuate that I'm a shooter. No sir; I can't shoot wu't shucks! An' they ain't ary man in this camp what kin. You hear me!"

The detective smiled.

"I'm afraid you over-rate my ability. I've taken a fancy to you, though, and I hope we may become friends. I've heard you called Socorro Sam to-night, and suppose that is your handle. I'm known as Kansas Karl. If I can ever repay you for your part in this affair I shall be most happy to do it. And don't forget to call on me, should you be in need of a friend."

Then he shook the hand of the man who had so unselfishly seconded him in the quarrel of the night, and took his way up the street.

"Well, I may say that in a manner I've failed in the first inning. But, there are more to be played. Buck Tolliver, if the Sphinx is Buck Tolliver, has some friends in this place who are disposed to stay with him. I've given that crowd to understand, however, that I'm not a man who can be trod on without doing some treading in turn. And that is not a little thing, at the present point in the game."

These thoughts were only an unexpressed soliloquy taking shape in his mind as he reviewed the stormy scenes through which he had just passed.

His head ached heavily as a result of the blow he had received in the gaming room; and the spur of excitement being now removed he felt weak and trembling.

"I guess I'll not go to Taggart's," he muttered. "I'm not in a presentable condition and will not be when breakfast time arrives, very probably, and I wouldn't have Tressie know of the night's row for a small mint of money. She wouldn't be able to understand the motives governing me, and I couldn't tell her. And of course when she saw me she'd ask questions; and it might be inconvenient to answer them. I guess I'll go the hotel I picked out the other day. Then, if I'm all right, I'll call on them tomorrow evening."

This matter settled, he changed his course and walked rapidly in the direction of the hotel.

CHAPTER IX.

AN HUMBLE HOME.

"THERE'S bound to be serious trouble about it, Tom, before the matter ends," declared Jas-

per Nolan, speaking to his son, who sat at the opposite side of the table. "That's what I've said all along, but none of them will hearken to me. It will end in a way that all concerned will bitterly regret."

Nolan shook his gray head sadly as he uttered the doleful prophecy. Then he lapsed into silence, and watched the movements of his daughter, who was busily tidying the room, after the morning meal. The subject which so exercised him was the labor troubles and the threatened strike.

Jasper Nolan was one of those men with whom the world seems to have dealt harshly. As stated, his hair was gray. But it was a whitening that was plainly premature. There were deep lines, too, on his face, caused by sorrow and care rather than the advance of years. His frame was feeble, and his loose clothing served but to reveal more clearly the shrunken form they sought to clothe and conceal.

There were many evidences of poverty in the belongings of the little room. The furniture was scanty, and the carpet worn and threadbare. Yet everything was as neat as patient toil and care could make it, showing that the home, humble though it was, was presided over by a woman with every instinct of the refined lady.

This was his daughter Kitty, whom he was now so lovingly following with his eyes.

In spite of the poverty of her surroundings and the coarseness of her attire Kitty Nolan was a woman to be respected, admired, and even loved. The title of woman scarcely became her, however. She was rather a girl just blossoming into womanhood—a womanhood every way sweet and lovable and good. She was not markedly handsome, in the strictest interpretation of that term; but she possessed what is better than mere beauty—a nobility of soul which spoke from her thoughtful countenance and looked from her deep, dark eyes.

The contrast between her and her brother was marked, and the difference was made even more striking by the facial disfigurement which marred whatever of beauty the lad may have possessed. While her eyes were dark, his were light; and the gracefulness of form which was hers was lacking in her brother. He was of heavier build, as naturally became his sex, yet it was quite evident he was not physically strong. And then there was that scarred and purplish blotch covering a large portion of the poor fellow's face, caused by his falling into a fire while a mere boy.

Those best acquainted with Tom Nolan bore frequent testimony to his innate goodness of heart—to his spirit of unselfish sacrifice and heroism. Yet there were well-springs of joy and of bitterness in his soul that even these friends had never fathomed. And although the blemish which inevitably set him apart from his fellows tended to cloud his life and give to his temper an unbecoming moroseness and acidity, the poetical cast of his mind lifted him to grander heights of cloud-templed beauty than were ever dreamed of by creatures of coarser mold.

"Do you think the men will go on a strike?" he asked, lifting his face from his hands, a position he had unconsciously fallen into the habit of assuming.

"Yes, I'm afraid so! The bosses seem unwilling to give in. I don't expect anything to come from the conference, though some of the men are banking considerably on it. The feeling will get bitter and more bitter, the breach will widen, and the strike will come at last. I'm sorry, I tell you. I expected to go to work next week, and if the strike should interfere with that, we'll be almost pushed to the wall."

Both Jasper Nolan and his son had been prostrated by mountain fever and had done very little work since coming to Leadville. On turning their faces to the new camp, whose fame was spreading everywhere, they had held vague hopes of being able to make rich discoveries and so become independent miners. But these hopes were quickly shown to be without substantial foundation. The claims were all taken; but, even if they had not been, the Nolans were hovering too near the confines of actual want to enable them to spend weeks or months in a search that might in the end prove futile.

Hence they sought employment of those more fortunate than themselves. Wages were excellent, judging by the Eastern standard, though not remarkable in a region where the prices of everything else reached the fabulous. They had come through with a pair of ponies. One of these they still held, as it was Kitty's favorite riding animal; but with hay at two hundred dollars a ton it was plain that it would have to go also. And this was but an example of the rates paid for many other things, provisions and wearing apparel not excepted. So that it will be seen that to live one was under the necessity of receiving big pay for his labor.

Jasper Nolan had from the outset opposed the threatened strike as being unwise and suicidal, arguing that the time which must be lost in the attempt to gain higher wages would more than offset those wages, should they be received, which was not at all certain, for miners and workmen were pouring in from every direction.

His statements had, however, been misinterpreted by his associates, and he was accused of being in sympathy with the hated bosses, if not actually in their pay as a spy and a sneak. And what little influence he might otherwise have possessed was thus swept away.

"Then you think there's danger the strike may come soon?" Tom questioned, with great earnestness.

"Of course I can't tell. It's just like a volcano, Tom. It may burst forth at any moment, and it may smolder along for weeks."

"How much money have we in the house, father?" Kitty asked, halting in her work, and looking anxiously from one to the other.

"Less than a hundred dollars," Nolan replied. "Not enough to go far, the way we have to pay for everything."

"And the pony will bring two or three hundred more, I suppose? Surely it ought to be worth as much as a ton of hay."

Tom laughed—one of those musical laughs that were sometimes drawn from him when he was overpowered by a sense of the ludicrous.

"I should say it ought to be worth that much!" he cried.

"Yes, no doubt it is," Jasper responded. "But you must remember that horse-flesh is about the cheapest thing there is in these mountains."

"Well, I'm going to sell the pony to-morrow, if I can find a purchaser, and the money I get for him, together with that we have in the house, will carry us along a while very nicely. It may be possible I can find something to do, too."

This was said by Kitty with a hopeful and resolute emphasis, intended to have a bracing effect on the discouraged mind of her father.

"Oh, we'll not starve, Kitty," he assured her. "I'm not afraid of that. But we've been crowded to the wall so long; and now, when it seemed we might once more be able to pull out of the Slough of Despond, this strike comes along to spoil all our calculations."

"Is Taggart any more disposed to yield than the other bosses?" queried the youth, a strange look in his eyes.

"Rather the opposite, I should say," Jasper responded. "I've been told he's the hardest and most stubborn of all of them."

"And I think that's so strange!" Kitty averred. "He has always seemed so kind."

"There's a deal of difference, you must remember, between mere kindness and what men call 'business.' I take it that Taggart's one of those men who are open-handed when it's a matter of charity, and as close-grained as an oak in business affairs. The world's full of such, and there's plenty of justification for their line of action. With them business is business, and something with which charity and kindly dealing has nothing whatever to do."

"I suppose so," said Kitty, after listening to this lucid explanation of her father's. "I'm not posted in regard to such things. It strikes me, though, that if there were a little more charity infused into the dealings which men have with each other it would be better both for the business and the charity."

Tom was very silent during this dialogue, crouching near the window ledge, with his marked face buried in the palms of his hands. He was thinking if there were not something he could do to increase the little hoard they had laid up for a rainy day.

His recent illness had left him weak. If he did anything, however, it seemed necessary that he should make the effort before the beginning of the strike, for he knew that he would be forced into it whenever it came, whether he wished to join the strikers or not.

He had heard that morning that Taggart was in need of a night watchman at a certain store-house near the smelter where the purified ore was kept for shipment. The place was as strong, apparently, as bolts and bars could make it; but in all such places a watchman was nevertheless thought necessary, and the opening seemed most opportune.

There were certain reasons, however—very foolish ones no doubt—which had caused him to hesitate about applying for the position. But the arguments favoring the act appeared conclusive. In all probability the watchman would not be forced into the impending strike; it was a position requiring little exertion or strength; and the pay was said to be good.

"I'll take it, if I can get it," he mentally declared, waving the objection which had heretofore weighed so heavily with him. "And for fear some one may be ahead of me I'd better go to see about it right away."

Neither Jasper Nolan nor his son had been in Taggart's employ. They were well known to that gentleman, however, and had felt that should he be at any time be in need of employees they could get positions under him.

Having thus decided the matter, Tom took up his hat, and announced his intention of going out into the town.

"You'll be back soon?" Kitty questioned.

"Yes," said Tom, and he strode away, leaving Jasper and Kitty talking over the troublous times that seemed impending.

CHAPTER X.

BLOWS THAT STING.

As Tom Nolan turned the corner which brought him into the principal street of the town, he heard wild cries and beheld a sight that almost caused his blood to congeal.

The streets of the mining-camp were scarcely worthy the name, for many of them were little better than paths, filled as they were with the stumps of trees which had been hastily cut away. Fenced lots were unknown, and people in their hurry took the shortest cuts to the mines and smelters and to their places of business.

Down this main avenue a horse was tearing at frightful speed, dragging at his heels a buggy that was bouncing and swaying in an alarming manner. Men were rushing from the houses and sides of the streets, shouting and calling and waving their hats in a way betokening insanity, as they always do in such cases; and the fright of the animal being increased by these demonstrations, it seemed that nothing short of a miracle could save the vehicle from total destruction.

What caused Tom's heart to almost stop its beating was that, recognizing the turn-out, he knew the occupant of the buggy must be Tressie Taggart, a girl who had shown her kindness to the Nolans in many ways.

At nearly every bound the buggy would strike one of the stumps that so thickly lined the thoroughfare, and be turned half over by the jar. The lines were trailing at the horse's heels, showing that the driver had no chance of regaining control of him; and his increasing terror was momentarily adding to the speed with which he was already flying.

"She will be killed!" Tom gasped, reeling from the weakness that took sudden possession of him. "Oh, can nothing be done to save her?"

At that instant the scared animal wheeled into a side street which was, if possible, in a more dangerous condition than the one he had been following. The vehicle narrowly escaped crushing against the corner of a building, missing the deadly contact apparently by a hair's breadth. Then the horse tore on in the same mad way.

But in that one moment, when the animal wheeled, Tom Nolan saw a white face looking despairingly out from the hood of the vehicle, and knew that the one in peril was really Taggart's sweet daughter.

The street the horse had taken connected with another running parallel with the one just left and which must be followed if the animal continued that far. There was a possibility that Tom could gain this street in advance of the runaway, so he dashed frantically in that direction, without however any very clear idea of what he should do if the race was won.

The thought of Tressie's imminent danger lent wings to his feet, and forgetting the weakness that had so long borne him down, he rushed on, the wild fear that he would be too late tugging at his heart-strings.

There was a clatter of hoofs as he reached this street, and a heavy shock which showed that the buggy had again come in contact with one of the many stumps filling the way; but when he looked he saw that the stout vehicle was still intact, though the shafts were splintered and bent and a half-dozen spokes had been torn from one of the wheels.

The horse seemed in a paroxysm of panic, the sweaty foam was flying from him in flakes, there was a fierce glare in his starting eyes, and his red and straining nostrils seemed on the point of spouting blood. An inevitable death apparently awaited any one reckless enough to stand in his pathway.

Without a thought of the danger to which he was exposing himself, Tom ran into the middle of the street, and when the maddened beast veered and tried to pass him, he leaped forward with a terrific bound and succeeded in grasping the bits of the bridle. The horse reared and plunged, dragging him helplessly along and threatening every instant to crush him with the pounding hoofs.

But he clung there with the desperation of despair, until others could hurry to his assistance and restrain the maddened brute. Then, when he realized that he had succeeded in saving the young lady's life, his unnatural strength suddenly forsook him and he reeled half-fainting into the arms of one of the bystanders.

Tressie Taggart, more dead than alive from the terrific experience she had undergone, was assisted out, and at her request led to the residence of a friend which was near. In spite of her bewilderment, however, she recognized who had been her preserver, and stopped to speak a word of praise to the exhausted young man. It was a simple and very proper thing to do, but Tom reddened under her words of kindly laudation, and found himself unable to answer a syllable.

With a great effort he recovered himself. Then, with a light laugh, he turned from the men who were showering their encomiums on him, brushed and rearranged his clothing, and hurried away.

Taggart had not yet heard of his daughter's misadventure, he felt sure, and he did not want

him to hear of it until after he had made application for the position of night-watchman.

In this, it will be observed, he was not like many men. The knowledge that he had saved Tressie's life would doubtless go a long way toward inducing Taggart to give him the position. This, however, was just what Tom Nolan did not want. If he secured it, he wished his success to be in recognition of merit and fitness for the place. To obtain it otherwise savoring of that condescension and charity he had always despised and avoided.

As he hurried along, with head bowed, his thoughts ran riot. He wondered if Tressie had recovered from the shock of that fearful ride, and whether she would remain for a time where she was or go immediately home. He was glad that chance had thrown him in the way of doing signal service for her, but he regretted that the result of it must be that their names would be for a time linked together in the common talk of the camp. If only that could have been avoided!

Thus speeding along, forgetful of his surroundings, he reached Taggart's place of business almost before he was aware of it.

Taggart was sitting alone in the office, busying himself with some accounts, his attitude and manner showing he had as yet heard nothing of the peril through which his daughter had so lately passed.

"Pardon me, please," said Tom, stepping forward and removing his hat. "I have been informed you are in need of a night-watchman for your store-house, and have come to apply for the place."

Taggart did not offer the young man a seat, but squared himself in his big office chair and stared at him harshly.

"You are Jasper Nolan's son, I believe?"

"Yes, sir," Tom replied, wondering what that had to do with his application, and speculating as to why Taggart should ask the question at all when he could not but know who he was.

"I can't hire a person in any way connected with that scamp," Taggart growled, frowning severely. "I'm told he's one of the leaders of these crazy agitators."

"He's not, sir!" Tom asserted, with much boldness. "He's been opposed to them all along."

"Oh, he has, has he?" the tone indicating disbelief of the statement.

"He has, sir, to my personal knowledge!"

"And hasn't he been lying off lately, pretending to be sick, for the sole purpose of having time to fire the hearts of these fools and induce them to go into a strike?"

"No, sir!" and Tom's face grew several shades redder than was its wont.

"Well, I can't hire you, young man! And moreover, you're lying to me about this thing. I know that your father is engaged in this underhand business; and the committee has resolved that, come what may, inasmuch as he has quit of his own accord, he shall never return to work with their consent."

This was a stunning blow delivered straight from the shoulder, and Tom Nolan felt it keenly. To be thus debarred from obtaining work was at that time the severest trial that could have come to his father. And if the decision of the bosses applied equally to himself he knew not what would become of them in their present straitened circumstances.

With this terrible calamity threatening, he forgot all about the scenes of peril he had just gone through.

"Oh, Mr. Taggart!" he cried. "I hope you will not believe these stories about father. I don't know who could have started them, but they are untrue. You have been deceived. Father has been quite sick of mountain fever. He is recovering, now, and has been hoping he may be well enough to return to work next week. If we are shut out from getting work, I don't know what we're to do."

A contemptuous smile momentarily disfigured Taggart's features.

"I presume there's nothing to hinder you from starving decently!"

The suppliant light faded from Tom's eyes, to be replaced by a fire that was seldom seen to burn there.

"A gentleman would not give expression to such a sentiment!" he declared, straightening his thin and weakened frame to its full height. "Those are the words of a coward, sir. We can starve, sir; but we would scorn to beg of you. Good-morning!"

"Hold on!" roared Taggart. "Don't be so fast, young man. You seem to forget our respective positions."

"No, sir, I forget nothing. I can't forget that wealth has failed to make a gentleman of you; and I won't remain to be longer insulted. Even you will acknowledge, I suppose, that poor folks may have hearts and feelings?"

"You scoundrel!" blurted Taggart, maddened by these plain words. "How dare you talk this way to me? Clear out of here this instant. And if you ever show your face here again, I'll make those red marks a good deal redder with a cowhide."

The words burned into Tom's brain, and from thence sunk into his heart, where they were destined to rankle till the day of his death.

CHAPTER XI.

YOUNG LOVE.

HOWEVER harsh Taggart may have been in business affairs, or in his dealings with those whom he felt to be his inferiors, he was never harsh to Tressie, and was ever ready to lay aside the vexing cares of trade to accompany her on little errands, or perform an act that would minister to her comfort and enjoyment.

She was as unlike him in character as it is possible for father and daughter to be, and no doubt this dissimilarity in disposition served largely to bind them more closely together.

When Tressie returned from the residence of that friend where she had sought temporary refuge, and nervously unfolded to him the story of her narrow escape from death, and of Tom Nolan's heroism, Taggart's face changed from ashy pallor to a flush indicative of shame.

"Now, why couldn't the fellow have told me of that?" he muttered under his breath.

The flush that succeeded the pallor went unnoticed by Tressie, or if noticed was naturally accounted for as being produced by feelings inspired by the recital of the story.

"If we could only do something for him!" she exclaimed. "I'm sure they're in need of many things, and Kitty is such a nice girl; but they're too proud to accept gifts."

Taggart rubbed his lips nervously, but made no reply. He was fighting a battle with pride. He felt that he was under obligation to help Tom in some way. If only he had known of this before uttering those harsh words! But they were beyond recall.

"I heard Kitty say, the other day, that Tom is out of work. Couldn't you find something for him to do about the mine or smelter? In that way we could help them without them feeling that charity was being thrust upon them."

"I don't know," said Taggart, pulling at his chin as if it were adorned with a heavy growth of beard. "To tell the truth, Tressie, I don't like those Nolans a bit. But since Tom took such risks to save you, I suppose I must do something."

He might have gone on with his reasons for disliking them, had not the look on his daughter's face checked him. It showed that she was deeply wounded by his apparent coldness and indifference; and he could not repeat the falsehoods he had hurled at young Nolan, knowing as he did that they were false.

The statements made to Tom had been brazenly made. There were some slight rumors to the effect that the Nolans favored a strike, but nothing which could be twisted into the charges preferred by Taggart. He had his own reasons for hating them, reasons which were not quite clear even to him and which savored somewhat of instinct, but they were as potent as if written in the blackest ink on the whitest paper.

He squirmed uneasily in the big office chair as Tressie looked him fully in the face.

"I don't know that I quite understand you," she faltered. "I'm sure they have always been kind, and are the best-hearted people in the world."

Perhaps Tressie did not know that those whom we have injured or whom we causelessly hate we hate bitterest.

"Yes, they are," he confessed, "and I haven't any real ground of objection against them. Only that I've heard they've been meddling in this labor trouble. However, we'll let that pass."

He turned to his desk and wrote a few hasty lines on a sheet of paper.

"Take this to Nolan's, if you feel strong enough to walk so far, and give it to Tom."

Tressie glanced at the note and saw that it read as follows:

"MR. THOMAS NOLAN:-

"MY DEAR SIR:—I wish to thank you for the brave act performed by you this morning in behalf of my daughter. The position of night watchman at my store-house is hereby tendered you, at the salary heretofore paid, work to begin at once.

"Very truly yours,

"ANDREW JACKSON TAGGART."

With this in her hand Tressie tripped lightly from the office and hastened to the residence of the Nolans. She found Tom there, and the red blotch on his face grew redder as she entered. He had said nothing to his father or sister of what had transpired in Taggart's office, nor of the desperate risks he had taken in saving Tressie from apparent death.

Kitty greeted her friend with her usual warmth and Jasper smiled a cordial welcome, but Tom cowered in the corner where he had been sitting and scarcely ventured to look up.

"I'll warrant he hasn't said a word about it!" Tressie declared, shaking a finger roguishly at the silent youth.

"About what?" asked Kitty, looking at Tom.

"There! I knew he hadn't. Aren't you ashamed of yourself, Tom?"

"No!" said Tom, straightening up and trying to smile. "I don't see that I did anything to go bragging about."

This little dialogue had the effect of working the curiosity of both Kitty and Jasper up to the fever point; and when they asked her to explain her meaning she told the story of the runaway and of the rescue.

"Tom is so modest about such things," Kitty whispered, in extenuation of her brother's failing.

"You will let me thank you, Tom?" Tressie pleaded, approaching him with outstretched hand.

Tom could not refuse this, though his face burned until he fancied the red blotch must look ten times more horrible than usual, and his breath came feverishly as he arose to accept the extended hand.

"You make too much of a little thing like that," he protested. "You wouldn't have expected me to do anything else but stop the horse, would you?"

"We'll not argue the point, Tom. You have my sincere thanks for what you did. And here is a note father sent you. I hope you will not refuse the place."

Tom trembled violently as he opened the folded sheet and saw what it contained.

For an instant he stood irresolutely, crumpling the paper nervously in his shaking fingers.

"I'm very sorry, Miss Taggart, indeed I am, that certain circumstances render it impossible for me to accept this offer. I hope you will not misconstrue the feelings which cause me to decline. I'm very thankful to you for obtaining me the offer—and—and—"

He stopped and sunk into the chair, and buried the red blotch in the palm of his hands, groaning inwardly. What must she think of him? He could not tell her the truth; and with her father's burning words searing his brain, he could not accept the proffered place.

"I'm very sorry," Tressie declared, the tones showing she was hurt by his singular refusal. "I had so hoped you would take it!"

"What nonsense is this?" asked Jasper, picking up and reading the crumpled paper which had slipped from Tom's hand. "My boy, you'll not have a better position offered you in a good while."

"I know it," said Tom, removing his hands and glancing about the room in a sickly way. "Of course I'm a fool!"

"You're nothing of the kind!" Tressie averred, coming gallantly to his rescue. "You have good reasons, certainly, and I'm cruel to have pressed the point after receiving your answer. Pardon me, please, and always remember that I'm your friend, and will be only too glad at any time to aid you if you will but show me how."

"You're a noble woman," murmured Tom, "and I'll not forget your kindness."

Tressie was painfully aware how strained the interview was growing; and after a few further words and a long talk with Kitty on other matters, took her leave, wondering what had caused Tom to act as he did.

On her way home, and while pondering this enigma, she fell in with Kansas Karl.

The detective seemed to be sauntering idly along the street without definite aim, when in truth he had seen her go to the Nolans', and had purposely placed himself in her homeward path that he might have a few words of conversation with her.

He was no longer staying at Taggart's, having remained there until he could find no reasonable excuse for so doing, and until he felt that to tarry further would be a gross imposition on his kind host.

Tressie's eyes lighted with pleasure when she saw him and he halted in his walk to obtain a word with her. During those days when his weakness shut him up to her society she had found a sweetness and graciousness in the tones of his voice and a brightness in his smile that thrilled her like a mingling of music and sunlight. And after he had gone she found herself dreaming those days over again in a way that was altogether new and strange.

Why the sources of her being seemed to be quickened by his very presence she did not seek to inquire. It was enough to know that his presence brought restfulness and contentment and his absence a sense of uneasiness and disquiet. To know more was to look the Fates in the face, and she was not ready for that, yet. One may walk through pleasant gardens and enjoy the delicious aroma of the flowers without studying the constituents of the soil or dissecting the bulbs and petals. And so she chose to walk this pathway of dreams without querying a guide-post as to where it might lead.

"Permit me to congratulate you upon your escape," he said, as she came up with him, for he had heard the particulars from the lips of many. "You were not injured? I had some thought of going over to your home to ask about you when I saw you leave."

"Only a little scared and shaken up," she answered. "But for the bravery of Tom Nolan, though, it might have been far worse. I have just been down there to thank him and to convey to him father's offer of a position as night-watch at the store-house."

"The act certainly deserves recognition, and I'm glad your father had so good a place open."

"But he won't accept it, Mr. Kennedy, strange as it may seem."

"Won't accept it?" and Karl's voice showed his astonishment. "Is the boy mad? He's out of a position, I understand!"

"So he is, but he wouldn't accept the place. He has some deep-seated reason, though I can't conjecture what it can be."

"It's certainly very strange," said the detective, thoughtfully.

"I'm sure he's in need of work," Tressie continued. "Don't you think, Mr. Kennedy, you might secure him something that would be just as good as this? I think one reason why he will not take this is that he doesn't want to seem to take pay for what he did for me. If you could get him another place, and offer it to him in such a manner that it would not seem to come from either me or father I think he would take it. You'll do this for me, Mr. Kennedy?"

"I certainly will!" he responded. "If there's a place in town to be had I'll get it for him, if I have to purchase it."

And thus conversing, they walked slowly onward until the Taggart Mansion was reached.

CHAPTER XII. TOSSING FIREBRANDS.

A SECRET meeting of the men who were asking for an advance in their pay was held the following night in an upper room which had been hired for the purpose from a man who sympathized with them. To this Jasper and Tom were invited; and after much discussion they decided to attend, hoping that by their presence they could do something to restrain the more lawless and restless of the men who were urging the matter on.

They were accompanied by a young Yankee, named Jake Tillotson, who had been for some time paying court to Kitty Nolan, and was consequently on terms of intimacy with the father and brother. Tillotson belonged to that shrewd type of the New Englander which has shown itself to be so fertile in ideas and resources. He was not an educated man by any means, and was tall and spare in appearance, and somewhat ungainly in manner, but he had an abundance of brains in his round, bullet head, and was altogether a man to be relied on in an emergency.

"They're a-driving things mighty lively," he declared, speaking of the turbulent working-men. "I'm with 'em in sentiment, but sometimes I'm afeared they've bit off more'n they can chew. An' if they allow them pesky fire-eaters to run things, they'll be purty shore to run 'em intew the graound."

The Nolans were of the same opinion; and in this frame of mind they set out for the place of meeting.

They found the room well filled when they arrived. Men were gathered in groups, discussing the situation in excited tones, some of them even indulging in wild and bloody talk.

"If them fellers pulls to the front, they'll burn the taown before the thing ends," Jake asserted, after listening awhile to the fierce threats these men were uttering.

The three friends strove to allay the increasing passions of the groups, but evidently to little purpose. Jasper Nolan was indeed frequently greeted with open sneers which showed his lack of influence over them. In fact, his outspoken opposition to the movement had already placed him under the ban of suspicion, and those who feared the effect of his words on the more conservative and timid had begun to speak of him slightly and with that bated breath which begets estrangement and distrust.

At length the buzzing of voices and the shuffling of feet ceased, and a tall man of fierce and sullen aspect and hang-dog visage arose and announced that the meeting should now come to order.

Then he launched into a statement of the grievances which had induced the convening of the body and gave a history of the movement from its inception up to that hour, ending with the presentation of the name of Mr. Timothy Pickerell as president of the inchoate organization.

The recommendation was greeted with a storm of applause and such a bewildering series of calls for "Pickerell!" "Pickerell!" that one might easily have closed his eyes and imagined himself in a fish-market.

When the callers had shouted themselves hoarse Mr. Pickerell elbowed his way to the front, and pounding on the desk with his fist, shouted order until he was black in the face and so hoarse he could hardly articulate.

When the din his appearance had evoked had somewhat subsided he proceeded to elaborately thank the assemblage for the great honor done him and to hope that no mistake had been made in thus singling him out for the high and responsible position of president of the meeting, on which point he had had serious doubts which had only been overcome by repeated urgings on the part of those better qualified to speak of his merits than himself.

This was ended by an exhortation to watchfulness and boldness in the assertion of their rights and privileges, which, as he warmed to his subject, ran into a fierce and denunciatory harangue.

"Fellow-workingmen! What is this country coming to when a few men who happen to have wealth can grind their laborers into powder?" he asked. "What shall be done to the op-

pressors? To the men who take the bread from the mouths of our wives and little ones to feed their fine horses with and bet on faro? There are heroes to-day ready to stand in the breach with fire and sword as there was in the days of Thermopylae and Waterloo, to say unto the haughty invader 'thus far shalt thou go, and no further, and here shall thy proud waves be stayed!'

"Yes, my beloved fellow-citizens! And we are traveling to that point with a swiftness that equals the wings of the morning. Only to-day one of the silver kings of Leadville, a man made rich by our sweat and cries and groans of agony, passed by me with the scorn and contumely of a high-stepping bank clerk, because, forsooth, my hands had been stained and hardened in heaping up his millions.

"Oh, ye shades of Washington and William Tell! Has it come to this? Shall free-born men become slaves, and be compelled to work ten hours a day for wages that won't keep them in liquor, when they ought to get twice as much pay for working eight? Answer me, ye winged winds that blow from the shadowy and silent past! Shall we stand it? Answer me!"

He halted tragically, but the winged winds didn't answer; and one of the listeners reminded him that it would be more sensible to query Tim McCarthy. But he failed to heed the suggestion.

"Down with Rooshian Czarism!" he shouted, mopping his heated face. "Down with king-craft and tyranny! Down with the oppressor, no matter what clothes he wears or what flag he flies! Call to your aid the resources of modern civilization: gunpowder, dynamite, fire and pistols! Let them feel the power of the working-man and make them understand he is no trembling whippet shaking like the mountain asp at every breath!"

With this peroration he sat down, feeling that he had said all that could be said on the subject, and the cheers that greeted the speech showed how dangerous such a man might be in spite of his bombastic ignorance and narrow intolerance.

Feeling that the task was well-nigh hopeless Jasper Nolan nevertheless got upon his feet to make a reply to Pickerell and attempt once more to stem the tide that was setting so strongly toward anarchism and bloodshed:

"My friends, I am a workingman like yourselves, and therefore to some extent understand the feelings which have prompted this movement and the calling of this meeting. But I want to set it down as a truth, in which all thinking men agree, that two wrongs cannot make a right. We have some grounds for discontent. That I am not disposed to deny. There are some rich men in this camp who are not what they should be, and riches tend to make mean men meaner. Compared with the great wealth the mine-owners are accumulating it may be that our wages are very small. But, compared by other standards, they are good. By our work we can live well, if we are economical, in spite of the high prices of everything; and that cannot be said of workingmen everywhere."

"The point I want to reach is: what are we to gain by this proposed strike? So far as I can see, nothing! Men are flocking here from every quarter; and if we quit work, they'll be only too eager to take our places, and we can only keep them from it by inaugurating war. We cannot afford to become law-breakers. Neither can we afford to become murderers, with a price on our heads; and this is what a revolver, fire and dynamite campaign would inevitably lead to. I trust you will seriously think of all this before you decide on any rash step, and that you may do nothing which you may hereafter have cause to regret."

This calm and dispassionate talk was frequently interrupted with jeers and hisses, and whispered mutterings of "coward" and "traitor," and when Nolan sat down he realized he had accomplished nothing, save to wind himself more completely in the meshes of distrust and suspicion with which the leaders were endeavoring to envelop him.

He had no sooner taken his seat than Pickerell leaped up and hurled at him some denunciatory and uncomplimentary epithets; and this was followed by others, until the very roof rung with maddened and impotent cries.

In the midst of it all Nolan remained smiling and serene, though Tom and Yankee Jake grew hot and uncomfortable with suppressed indignation.

No satisfactory conclusions were reached and no line of work was mapped out, however, and at a late hour the meeting adjourned, without having accomplished anything except to more thoroughly infuriate the reckless and unthinking mob.

CHAPTER XIII.

AN ODD QUARTETTE.

JASPER NOLAN, at the close of the meeting, went immediately home, but Jake Tillotson and Tom remained on the street for a while, discussing with others the events of the night.

They were at length on the point of following the example of Jasper, when they were greeted with an imitation Indian war-whoop, and Socorro

Sam, who had caught sight of them, glided from the gloom with the stealthy tread of an Apache.

"High ole time!" he cried, pulling his piratical mustache with one hand, as he greeted them, and working the other up and down like an animated pump-handle. "Ekal to an Injun raid for excitement; it is, by mighty!"

"Where have you been?" Tom questioned.

"Meetin's! Where else should I be? Been 'tendin' meetin's till I 'low I must feel purty much like a parson after a protracted effort."

In this ingenious way Socorro managed to convey the information that there had been another meeting of the proposed strikers that night and that he had been in attendance.

"You jist come from up-stairs, eh? Let's go to the General's an' talk the thing over. The General is a knowing critter, if he is Dutch!"

Socorro Sam apparently had a very exalted opinion of Schermann, who was really as stupid and pig-headed as he could well be. The excitement they had gone through disinclined Tom and Tillotson to retiring early, and although they had no faith in the judgment of the German "fence" they agreed to accompany Socorro to "the Tent," as the General's place of business was called.

It was very late when they reached the place, and they found it almost deserted. Business had been brisk that night, partly owing, no doubt, to the desire of the leaders of the labor movement to fire the hearts of their followers with something more than mere words, and after the toils and gains of the evening Schermann was seated in his big chair comfortably enjoying his pipe.

Socorro Sam was well known to him, and received a cordial greeting; and the others were likewise received as being Socorro's friends.

"Shet right in, shentlemen! What vhill you have in my line this evening?" and he moved as briskly as he could to the rear of the bar.

"Name yer p'izen!" shouted Socorro. "It's my treat!"

Tillotson and Tom declined the offer; and the quartette, at Sam's request, adjourned to the little back room, "to git the Gin'r'al's opinions on the way things air goin', begosh!"

"Now, lookee hyer, Gin'r'al!" said Socorro, twisting his heavy weapons into an easier position as he settled himself in his chair. "If two men git to fightin', what's the consequence?"

A grin came to the German's fat face as he held his long-stemmed pipe out before him and emitted a cloud of tobacco smoke from his nostrils.

"Mine frient, dhoce vhas nod a tifficul kwession. Sairdenly one uff dhem mens vould git licked!"

"Edzackly!" and Socorro bobbed his head and tugged furiously at his mustaches. "That's jist what I've been a-argyin' the intire evenin'!"

"An' if one of 'em's a big man with plenty o' weepoms, an' t'other a little banty of a cuss 'thout anything but his fists, which of 'em's boun' to be done up? Answer me that, you Dutch beer-keg!"

"Der bandy vould git whipp'd efery dime!"

"Hear him, will ye!" cried Sam, in ecstasy. "Them's chunks of wisdom, solider and heftier than a gold brick. Now, ye see, it's jist this way: Hyer's the big man, which air the rich galoots and the minin'-bosses an' them that's standin' in with 'em; an' on the other side stan's the fellers that air kickin' up this rumpus. They're the banty, 'thout any spurs yit, scarcely. An' it's jist as the Gin'r'al says—they're shore to git licked."

Socorro was so elated by the support his opinions had thus received that he gave a diminutive war-whoop and emptied at one gulp the brandy glass before him.

"The Gin'r'al allus fer hoss sense, says I! Yes, they'll git licked; an' then they'll feel meaner an' wusser'n ever, an'll wish they could find a crack some'eres to hide the'r'selves in. But you can't make 'em see it."

"Sich men as them air baound not tew see anything!" Jake declared. "They're like the chap mentioned in Scripter, who, having eyes, saw not, and having ears didn't hear. I allaow it's because they don't want tew."

"Adzackly! Now yer a-gamblin' to win."

"An', is there anything, Gin'r'al, that kin be done to put a stop to this ruction?"

"Vhill dhem ub mit peer, mine frient; vhill dhem ub mit peer! Dot alvhays make men vheel vhoony und goot. Uff you do dot, I vhill cuarandee dot dhey shoods nopoity and brund ub no houses. Peer vhas dhe great ciivilizer uff dhe vorlt. Id make beace where dhere vhas emidy, und choy where dhere vhas vighting."

This eulogy on the German national drink so tickled the fancy of Socorro Sam that his laughter became almost hysterical.

"Hear 'im, will ye? Oh, ye miners of Leadville! Sich eloquence fairly makes me weep. Beer!"

And again Socorro went into convulsions.

The General regarded these manifestations in silence, and with wonder in his big, round eyes.

"What vhas dhere vhoony apout det, eh? Py sheminy, I speak dhe droot alre'tty. Uff you vhekkers drink more peer und less whisky id vouldt pe bockets in your tollars, I dhinks me!"

Whisky makes a man grazy like a vild In-chuns."

"You can't go back on that last assertion, Socorro!" Tom Nolan declared.

"But the idee!" wheezed Socorro. "The very idee! It would take all the beer in Colorado to set 'um up once around."

The German's suggestion made him forget the ponderous queries he had been propounding, and, aided possibly by the liquor he had swallowed, set him to singing hilarious and gleeful melodies about various mining and cowboy heroes and their respective sweethearts; and from this he fell to dancing and whirling about the room to the General's annoyance and the imminent peril of the breakable furniture.

"Ach, mine gootness! Vhas sooch a mans ever pehelt!" the German groaned. "Sdop him, Misder Dillodson, or dhoce looking-classes vhill be smashed indo a t'ousant million bieces!"

That there was a motive in this madness was evinced later, for, in making one of his gyratory swings, he stumbled heavily against a desk standing in one corner, knocking it to the floor and falling on it so heavily that it fell apart, disclosing a store of watches and jewelry.

As these rolled over the floor, the German uttered an angry cry, and flinging himself against the reckless dancer, forced him into a chair.

Socorro Sam's eyes rolled in apparent bewilderment and wonder, and he pulled at his mustache so fiercely that it seemed he must inevitably drag it up by the roots.

"I didn't know, Gin'r'al, that you was in the jew'lry bizness!" he cried, with well-feigned astonishment. "Well, dog my cats, if that hain't a su'prise! You've got a right smart wheen o' the beauties, too."

Tillotson and Tom were really astonished, so astonished they knew not what to say. They knew of the frequently-recurring stage-robberies, and the conviction was at once forced home to their minds that here were some of the fruits of those raids.

"Gid oudt off mine establishtmend!" howled Schermann, blind with rage. "Dhoce pelonk to mine brodher, vhat is going to sed up in the peezness here, und you vhas ruining dhem by stebbing on dhem in dhot vhat."

He pushed Socorro toward the door, and the latter, by a slight nod, made his friends understand they were to follow him without further parley.

Once outside, he whispered:

"I found out the other day that them things was there, and I was bound you should see them. The Gin'r'al's in with the road-agents jist as shore as guns!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE CANYON COHORT.

"HANGED ef I like this hyer idee of layin' around, and doin' nothin', while the swag's bein' carried by every day. It ain't bizness! Well, 'nough to be sorter keerful, but they is sech a thing as bein' too keerful."

The speaker was sprawled on the grass in an isolated mountain cove not many miles from Leadville, and he spat out the words in a bitter way indicative of intense displeasure.

A number of men were gathered there, in various lazy attitudes, and to two of these he was speaking. They were all members of the robber band which had taken the name of the Canyon Cohort, and whose deeds of violence had already caused the name to be known and hated by the honest men of the mountains.

"I s'pose the cap'n hez good reasons fer goin' it a little slow jest now," replied one of his hearers. "We've been rushin' things purty lively fer awhile, and hain't hed no cause to complain of the hauls we've made. How much wuz it the last bizness panned out?"

"Bout ten thousan', I heern, but a feller can't never be shore 'bout figgers Velpau gives ye. Likely 'twas more, though that was the basis on which the divvy was made. Seems to me he never gits half as much fer the watches and other trinket as they're wu'th."

"You don't want to say that to him, er where he'll git to hear it, Jim Denton!" the other listener growled. "Twouldn't be healthy I'm thinkin'. The lieutenant's got a devil of a temper when he gits r'iled, an' when his dander's up he'll shoot quick's wink."

"An' it's sich fellers as you, Tom Jones, w'ot makes him so fiery an' uppish. Otherwise he wouldn't da'st to be. If the boys hed any said they'd take him down a peg an' show him where he belongs, the next time he got onto one of his tantrums. Them's my sentiments."

"What do you s'pose he got fer that last lot?" the second queried, referring to the watches.

"Don't know, but I'll bet 'twas more'n he reported. I'm told that the Dutch saloon-keeper they call the 'Gin'r'al' takes 'em off his hands."

"W'ot reason does the cap'n give fer orderin' us to lay so quiet, when the stages is a-runnin' every day, jammed full o' dust an' rich passengers?"

"He says they's been detectives sent out after us, and that it's best to lay a leetle low fer awhile."

The others greeted this with a snort of contempt.

"Detectives be hanged! Ef they come foolin' round hyer we'll mighty quick give 'em a taste o' rope!"

An excited buzz in the conversation going on about them caused them to look up at this juncture, and they relapsed into silence as they saw Philip Velpau and another man come into sight around a spur of the hill only a short distance away.

The stranger wore high top-boots and jingling spurs, velveteen pants, dark coat and cloak, white cowboy hat, and an impenetrable black mask, which completely concealed his face. He was the captain the speakers had referred to, while Velpau was the one spoken of as "lieutenant."

That the mysterious captain was held in considerable fear and awe was made manifest by the deathlike silence which immediately fell on the members of this desperate band. With cunning, hawk-like eyes they watched him approach, but not a word did they utter.

"The captain wants to see you in the canyon," said Velpau, as he drew near.

As for the captain, he stood stiffly by, saying nothing, his restless glance roving from face to face as if he would read the thoughts of every man there. There was something in those dimly-caught and burning glances that caused the villains to shrink and cower, and the boaster who was loud in his criticisms a few moments before had now nothing to say.

Having given his order, Velpau marched straight on toward the mountain wall; and the captain, after he had ended his inquisitorial survey of the crime-stained faces before him, followed in his wake.

The members of the band straggled after, their countenances showing a curiosity that was not unmixed with fear. It was not often the mysterious captain, whose personality had always been veiled from them, came down thus to give orders or to confer regarding the work which he planned—for all the work done by them was outlined in the brain of this strange individual.

They knew him as their captain; a few even claimed they had at some remote time seen and talked with him face to face, without the intervention of that all-concealing mask; and they had more than once felt the weight of his displeasure and realized his power.

Velpau was his second and mouth-piece, and Velpau bowed to his will with as much subservience as the meanest and humblest in the band.

Of one thing only were they sure: He had strange and mysterious means of obtaining information. If a particular stage was heavily loaded with valuables he sent them word; and if instead of valuables it held troops and peril they were warned. And not only that, but their own acts and thoughts seemingly were frequently laid bare to his gaze, as had been shown when a would-be traitor to their cause attempted to deliver them over to the authorities, and gained therefor a summary punishment and terrible death. They had tried to account for some of his power and prescience by supposing there was a spy in their midst, but if such there was they had never been able to detect him.

A brisk walk of a hundred yards brought Velpau and the captain to the end of the valley. They were there surrounded by high cliffs, and could apparently go no further. But, turning sharply to the left, a passage opened before them, narrow at first, but growing wider as they advanced. Soon the walls expanded, and a green glade stretched away on either hand, and in it a bunch of horses was feeding, while through its center trickled a small stream of snow-fed water.

Only the passage could be called a canyon; but this was the home of the outlaws, and from it the band had taken its name.

Under the cliffs which overhung one side of the valley a number of rude huts had been constructed; and into the shadows of some pines to the rear of these Velpau and the masked captain led the way.

The two were talking in low, earnest tones, when their followers gained the place and ranged themselves in a silent and respectful semi-circle.

The conversation at once ceased, and the captain faced his men in a stern and frigid manner.

"I have been told," he began, "that some of you are weary of my service, and say you do not get enough of the swag taken, and that I am not always fair in the division of the spoils."

The faces of the men who had been talking on this subject but a short time before blanched, and their forms trembled in a way to show the captain that, even if the shot had been made at a guess, it had found a mark.

"All I have to say to such men," and the captain bent a piercing gaze on the scared wretches, "is that if they do not wish to serve me longer they are at liberty to go. I have always treated you more than fairly, have divided with you just as I agreed to in every instance, and have watched over you in a way to insure you protection. To those who are faithful I shall con-

tinue to do the same. But woe unto the man who shall venture to turn traitor! I want no bickering and jealousy. You must trust me, and implicitly obey the orders sent to you through the lieutenant. If you do that all will be well.

"We have not done much recently, for the reason that there has lately come into Leadville a noted detective who calls himself Kansas Karl. I think he is here for the purpose of ferreting us out, and so I thought it best to remain quiet for a little. And besides, no matter what may be said to the contrary, the stages have not been carrying enough coin and bullion to make it scarcely worth while to hold them up.

"I came down here to-day to tell you of these things, and to remind you that Velpeau is not the head of the organization, but only my lieutenant. In addition, I came to bear a piece of good news. The firm of Sexton Brothers has a large amount of silver bullion stored in Leadville, which for some time they have been holding back in the hope that shipping rates will get lower. We have never struck in the town, and I propose we now make a blow at this.

"To Velpeau I have given full details of my plans, with a sketch of the interior of the building, its weak points, etc., all of which he will make known to you in due time. Allow me, therefore, to refer you to him for particulars, and to again caution you to watchfulness of your thoughts and your tongues, to bravery in time of peril, and faithfulness to the organization even in time of death. All of which you have sworn."

"All of which we have sworn!" the men responded in unison.

Then the captain turned away, and the men, knowing that no more was to be heard until the time came for further revelations at the hands of Velpeau, strolled about the park, or sought the seclusion of the huts.

CHAPTER XV.

A MIDNIGHT RAID.

In accordance with his promise to Tressie Taggart, Kansas Karl kept up a constant and sharp watch for a good position suited to the character and needs of Tom Nolan. He had little difficulty in finding a number of places, for the labor supply was scarcely yet equal to the demand, but they were all objectionable from one cause or another. Tressie had made him fully acquainted with what she considered Tom's necessities, and had laid on him certain requirements which were difficult to fill. A place demanding hard labor would not do, she had said, neither would one where the tasks were onerous or in any sense degrading.

He succeeded at length, however; finding a position exactly similar to the one Tom had refused from Taggart.

Meeting young Nolan the next day, he shook hands with him cordially—for through the intervention of Tressie they had some time before been brought together and made acquainted—and then asked him how he was getting along with his work.

"I've been out of work since I've been sick," Tom answered. "Regular mining's too hard on me, yet, though I intend to go at it next week, if it's possible."

"Ah?" and the detective's face showed the keenest sympathy. "Isn't there anything else you can get? Let me see. It occurs to me I heard one of the Sexton Brothers asking about help this morning. Yes, I'm sure I did. They want some reliable man as night-watch at the place where they have their bullion stored. I was in their establishment, and I'm certain that's what I heard them say. That would be just the thing for you, Nolan!"

Tom glanced keenly at him, half guessing the truth hidden behind the smoothly-spoken words. He was shrewd and far-sighted in many things, and in a manner divined the unspoken relations existing between this man and Taggart's daughter.

"They were born for each other," he had many times said to himself, as, in the stillness of the night, he tossed on his fevered couch. "Both are good, and noble and true, and they love each other! My blessing go with them!"

"Perhaps I wouldn't suit them," said Tom, the color in his face slightly increasing.

"We can see. There's nothing like trying, you know! I'll go with you; and I'll guarantee that if the place isn't already taken, you can get it."

In making this warrant Karl understood thoroughly what he was doing. Not an hour before he had talked with the Sexton Brothers on that very subject, and had received the assurance that young Nolan could have the place if he wished it.

After some slight demur, Tom acceded to this, and together they set out for the office of the Sextons; with the result that Tom was duly employed and installed as night-watch in the warehouse or room containing the valuable deposit of bullion.

The structure was located near their smelting works, and was said to be burglar and fire proof, so that a watchman seemed an unnecessary appendage. But the Sextons, through recent

losses, had had the belief disagreeably impressed on their minds that burglar-proof buildings are not always equal to the task of withstanding burglarious assaults.

Tom Nolan had a deeply realizing sense of the great trust thus reposed in him, and was altogether so anxious lest anything should occur to the building or its contents that he prevailed on Jake Tillotson to remain with him for a few nights—not to sit up and watch, but to sleep in the structure where he could be called in case of emergency.

Jake readily agreed to this—for was not Tom his prospective brother-in-law, and were they not otherwise on the best of terms?

For two or three nights nothing occurred to disturb the usual serenity of affairs. But a blow was preparing, which was destined to fall heavily.

On this night Tillotson had retired somewhat earlier than was his custom, and for a long time Tom had sat quietly listening to the murmuring of the wind and the deep breathing of his companion, rising only to make his ordinary rounds and see that all was well.

Thinking over it afterward, he believed he must have fallen into a slight doze, though he could remember no awakening. He was seated in his usual place, with a book he had been reading lying in his lap, when he felt himself suddenly seized and held as if in a grip of iron.

He was thoroughly aroused on the instant and shouted wildly to warn Jake, and ask him to come to his assistance.

For a moment he could scarcely comprehend what had happened. Yet it was evident that some person or persons had gained access to the building, and as soon as this had bad time to filter through his mind he knew they had come for purposes of robbery. Nothing else could explain their presence there at that unseemly hour, for had they wished to harm him, another time and place would have been chosen.

He struggled violently, but in vain. The strong arms wound sinuously about him and held him down until a rope had been knotted about his limbs and body and a rude gag thrust into his mouth.

Tillotson, as soon as that wild call reached him, sprung from his bed and rushed to Tom's aid. But he was tripped up as he ran forward, and attempting a resistance, was stricken senseless by a heavy blow.

Then he was tied as Tom had been, and tossed down by the latter's side on the hard floor.

Tom was as helpless now as a babe, but he managed to wriggle into a position commanding a view of the room. There were ten men in it, all masked, enough certainly to have taken the structure in spite of any resistance Jake and he could have made, once an entrance was gained.

Judging from the fact, or rather the belief, that there had been no noise, Tom came to the conclusion that they had in some way succeeded in unlocking the ponderous doors.

Having disposed of the guards in a way that must have been quite satisfactory, the scoundrels gathered in a group at the further end of the room and proceeded coolly to discuss the situation.

The discussion did not last long. They gathered the bullion into heaps, drawing it from the places of deposit with as much certainty as if informed of every detail of the interior, and proceeded to bear it to the outside. How much there was of it Tom never knew, though, from the pile of bullion, it must have been large.

All this while he was torn with fears and anxieties concerning Jake, who, since receiving that terrible blow, had lain as if dead. He listened for a breath or a movement showing that Tillotson was still alive, but could hear nothing.

With these apprehensions driving him half-wild, he yet forced himself to watch narrowly the movements of the burglars, who were working with marvelous silence and celerity. Not a word of command had he heard spoken, and the only conversation had been that short and whispered conference at the further end of the apartment. Yet each man moved as if under the controlling voice of a leader. Apparently everything had been thoroughly arranged beforehand, even to the particular task each was to perform.

Neither he nor Jake received any further consideration after they had been bound and cast to the floor, the burglars thinking them too securely tied to be able to make trouble or give any alarm. Nothing had come of that wild call for help which had been sent forth by Tom, when he first felt the grasp of those sinewy arms.

Seeing that the robbers were paying no heed to them, Tom began to wiggle and twist in the hope that he might loosen his bonds. The knots were tightly drawn and every movement caused the cords to cut deep into the flesh, but he cared not for this so long as there existed the faintest ray of hope.

No helpless captive in savage hands ever made a more desperate effort to regain freedom. He strained and tugged until the sweat

came out in great drops on his forehead, and his throbbing breast seemed on the point of bursting. His breath came in labored gasps, the blood coursed through his veins like molten fire, and the room swam.

A step in his direction caused him to cease, for a time, the desperate effort, but it was renewed when the man again walked away. But surge and tug and strain as he might he could neither loosen nor break the cruel thongs that held him; and the struggle was at length given over as useless.

It was renewed after the burglars had taken their departure; being suspended, however, when a movement on the part of Jake Tillotson showed that young gentleman to be still in the land of the living.

Tom Nolan rolled to where Jake was lying, and began digging at the latter with his knees, succeeding after much effort in arousing Tillotson to a sense of his whereabouts and condition.

But Tillotson was in much the same condition as Tom. He was bound and gagged, and in addition was suffering from a terrible and bloody wound on the head. A series of gurgling sounds came from him as Tom continued to poke at him with his knees. They were inarticulate, but by no means meaningless, for they showed young Nolan that his friend was alive and conscious.

Soon after he saw Tillotson roll over and begin to strain and writhe as he had himself been doing. The result was the same; for after a prolonged effort, Jake rolled back again, gave a groan and became silent.

They were indeed prisoners, and must so remain until friends came to their rescue.

CHAPTER XVI.

FALELY ACCUSED.

To Tom Nolan it seemed the night would never pass. The hours dragged slowly and drearily, the pain produced by the cord and the choking gag was intense, and altogether it was the most wretched experience he had ever undergone. The agony of suspense and anxiety was scarcely less excruciating than the mere physical anguish he was forced to endure.

In imagination he went over the scenes of the night from the time of reaching the place, until after the burglars had consummated their bold plans. Every detail passed in relief before his mental vision; and he groaned as he thought that perhaps a momentary fit of sleepiness or inattention had caused it all.

A bell was suspended above the building, and it had been pressed on him by the Sexton Brothers that in case of an attack, or even a suspicion that all was not right, he was to send the bell's brazen warning flying through the night. And the robbery of the building had been committed, and he had not sounded a note!

Then he would wonder what Jake was thinking of, and if he had been seriously hurt by the blow which felled him. Oh, it was a horrible night! Filled with unspeakable torture.

But the gray morning dawned at last. Through the window he watched the rosy light deepen and widen in the east, and creep higher and higher, until the heavens were masses of flame-colored clouds. Then the great globe of fire peeped like the red and angry eye of a disturbed sleeper above the far horizon, and a little later, after an apparent struggle with the reluctant earth, which changed its sphericity into an elongated, egg-shaped mass, it swung triumphantly into space, and mounted slowly skyward.

Its light falling in the apartment now with sufficient force to illuminate it, Tom Nolan looked at his companion who had been for some time silent. He could hardly recognize the face beheld as that of Jake Tillotson, it was so masked with blood stains. The hair was a mass of clotted gore, and even his clothing showed patches of the same dull, brick-dust color. He was not dead, though, as was shown by the regular rising and falling of his chest; and Tom, feeling sure he had fallen into natural slumber, sent up a prayer that was full of gratitude for his friend's preservation.

The sounds which had been for some time growing in volume in the streets were of a character now to indicate that the work of the day had commenced. There was the noisy rattle of carts, the tramp of hurrying feet and occasionally the sounds of voices. But none of the feet seemed bent toward the door of the store-room and none of the voices held an inquiry as to why the night watchman had not yet appeared. Bound in that little room they were apparently forgotten by the busy world, that streamed unheeding by, so near and yet so far away.

But there came a thunder on the heavy panels at last that caused Tom to start with mingled joy and dread, and he aroused the slumbering Yankee. The heavy knock was repeated; then he heard a series of exclamations and recognized among others his father's well-known voice. It was evident that Jasper had become alarmed at his son's delay in returning home and had set out to investigate the cause.

The exclamation was succeeded by calls. The

key to the door Tom had in his pocket, but he understood that one of the Sextons carried a duplicate of it. This was true, as he quickly discovered. Footsteps hurried away, returning soon. Then a key was turned in the ponderous lock, the door swung back with a groan and a creak, and the excited men streamed into the room.

They beheld a sight that filled them with astonishment and dismay. Tom and Jake lay before them bound and helpless, and the valuable bullion was gone.

"How is this?" the senior Sexton asked as he bent over Tom and cut the cord that held him and removed the gag, at the same instant that other hands did a like service for Tillotson.

For a few moments the released men could neither stand nor speak, so cramped were their limbs and so stiffened their jaws.

Tom was the first to regain the use of his tongue, and hurriedly mumbled an account of the events of the night.

There was a look of distrust and even disbelief on Sexton's face.

No one noticed this, perhaps, save young Nolan, for the attention of nearly all in the increasing group was centered on Jake Tillotson, whose blood-stained face gave evidence to the murderousness of the blow that had been dealt him.

Tillotson was so weak he could scarcely stand; and arrangements were at once made for conveying him to his lodgings. But Jasper Nolan vetoed this, declaring that inasmuch as Jake had received the hurt while befriending his son he should be taken to the Nolan cottage, where he would be sure to have the best of care.

"Any place'll dew me," Jake alleged, not at all averse to the carrying out of the proposal which would place him so near the woman he loved. "Frum the way my head feels them chaps must have hit me with a club."

The conveyance was at the door, and the Nolans and their friend got into it and were driven rapidly away.

"I didn't like the looks of Mr. Sexton," Tom said, as soon as they were beyond hearing of the crowd. "He seemed not to believe my story."

The others thought him mistaken in this, but events showed he had not misinterpreted the expression he had noticed on the man's countenance.

In the home of the Nolans Jake Tillotson received the best of attention. There never was such another nurse as Kitty, he thought. How soft and soothing her warm palm was. How kindly her smile, how quiet her footsteps, how restful her voice! It was worth having one's skull crushed just to have her moving about the couch in that sweet and thoughtful way!

The contusion was a serious one, the doctor said, though there was no fracture of the skull; and with care and attention Tillotson would be able to leave his bed in a few days.

Speculation ran high as to who the robbers were. That they had in some way obtained a duplicate of the key to the heavy door was evident to the most obtuse. Either that, or they had been admitted from the inside.

This last was evidently the view held by the Sextons. Tom, as soon as he had seen his friend safely lodged under the care of Kitty, hastened to the business office of his employers, anxious to repeat privately all he knew of the mysterious affair. His mind was in a whirl, and his thoughts somewhat incoherent in consequence. That suspicious glance given him by one of the firm returned again and again to disturb and harass.

There was an ominous silence in the office when he entered. The brothers seemed embarrassed; but listened quietly to the story he had to tell.

"Either dilemma tells rather against you, Mr. Nolan, I'm sorry to say!" the elder asserted. "I can't openly charge you with being in with those scoundrels; but if you were not, you are guilty of culpable negligence in falling asleep and allowing them to gain access to the room, without sounding the alarm. That they could not have done, if you were wakeful and vigilant."

The red splotch on Tom's face burned like leaping fire, but he answered not a word. He felt that perhaps he had fallen asleep and thus allowed the robbers to gain an entrance, though the sleep, as it seemed to him, must have been in any event but momentary.

"We don't make any charges, Mr. Nolan, though we shall exercise the privilege of thinking what we please. Here is your money. We shall no longer require your services."

Tom picked up the coin and walked away heart-sick and faint. What else, he asked himself, could he do but thus turn away? They would not heed his protestations of innocence. That they believed him an accomplice of the burglars he knew. It was all too plainly apparent from their words and manner.

Nevertheless, as he stumbled toward the entrance he halted, turned half around and said, in a voice that was choked and husky:

"I am not what you think me, Mr. Sexton! And the time will come when my innocence of this horrible charge will be made as plain as the noonday!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A HOT PURSUIT.

"HEY! Somethin' crooked 'bout this!" and Socorro Sam crouched in the dense shadows of a side street, into which he had hurriedly whisked.

A number of dark figures had come suddenly into view and their creeping, crawling attitudes were so suggestive of evil intent that the quick mind of Socorro had immediately jumped to the realization that their presence was a portent of ill.

As he lay thus concealed and saw them file slowly by, the exclamation recorded arose involuntarily to his lips. A passing beam of moonlight had shown that their faces were hidden behind black masks, and that each individual carried a bag filled with some weighty substance.

"Thieves, as I'm a livin' sinner! Now, what kin be in them racks? I'd give somethin' han'-some to know."

They passed rapidly, their footsteps awaking scarce an echo. And when they had disappeared Socorro arose and followed them with a tread as silent as their own.

Had he known what had transpired he would have hastened to the store-room of the Sexton Brothers and released the friends who were lying there bound and helpless. But he knew nothing of this, and it was as well perhaps that he did not, for Socorro had now entered upon a chase whose consequences were destined to be far-reaching.

The robbers were making for the open country, and though the night was shadowy it was also still, and the daring trailer had no great difficulty in keeping within hearing distance of them. Few men in Leadville were so expert in this kind of work as he. He had spent years on the border, and had more than once been employed to run murderous and thieving bands of Apaches to their mountain lairs.

Once free of the town the caution of the villains relaxed somewhat, rendering Socorro's task comparatively easy. The only thing he feared was that they might soon take to horses.

This they did, on gaining a little grove a mile from the camp.

"Now comes the tug of the bizness!" he gritted, as, with some disgust, he watched their movements. "Shanks' pony ag'in hoss flush! I'll bet two to one that I git beat!"

Notwithstanding this feeling he determined to keep the scamps in sight as long as he could; and with this resolve set off down the trail after them as soon as they were in motion.

It was not much past midnight, and the night being no further advanced caused them to jog along more slowly and leisurely than they otherwise would have done, so that by adopting the long, swinging lop of the Indian runner Socorro Sam found it a matter of comparative ease to still keep them within hearing.

As the town was left further and further behind they became talkative, seeming to have scant fear now of a successful pursuit. In vain, however, did their follower strain his ears to catch a sentence of what they were saying. The hoofs of their horses were evidently muffled, for they gave out hardly a sound, but what little noise they did make, together with his own efforts in keeping close at their heels, prevented Socorro from understanding a word.

Had they been as watchful as they should, they might have caught an occasional glimpse of him at this time, as he glided stealthily from shadow to shadow in their wake, for his desire to learn the subject of their conversation tended to make him overbold. But they had no thought that they were being thus dogged, and seldom if ever glanced along the backward trail.

"Phew! Hot work, this is!" Socorro panted, when two miles had been covered in this way. "Been a blame long time since I done anything of this kind, an' it gits purty clost to me. If they'd let up on it long enough fer me to git one, good breath, I'd be bleeged. Hain't any use to ast them, though, I reckon."

At this point they turned into a little-used trail diverging from the main stage route to the East, and were soon in a country that was very broken.

This compelled even slower traveling, and Socorro now found time to get a breath between jumps, as he expressed it. There was also a goodly quantity of timber on the slopes and lower levels, for the Leadville charcoal-burners had not penetrated that far as yet, and the shadows cast by the trees greatly aided him in keeping near the retreating party.

Morning was close at hand, and he was almost exhausted with the great and unusual exertions he had put forth, when they turned into a grassy glade and came to a halt.

"Gittin' nigh the wolf's den, I 'low!" panted Socorro, halting likewise. "Seems to me I've run more'n a hundred miles, though perhaps ten'd be nigher the correct figure."

He felt sure he was on the eve of important discoveries—that in fact the home of the outlaws must now be near, and he kept his ears and eyes wide open for developments.

One of the band uttered a low call, which was quickly responded to from some spot not far dis-

tant, and the outlaws were then joined by other mysterious and shadowy figures.

A talk followed, and then the men dismounted and unsaddled their steeds, and went into camp.

Day was beginning to break and Socorro felt how perilous it would be should he be caught spying in the vicinity. If these men were what he believed them, it must result in death, for the robber band which then infested those mountains had the reputation of being merciless in its treatment of enemies falling into its hands.

It seemed certain they intended a prolonged stay there, and from the character of the surroundings he believed this to be their secret haunt and hiding-place, issuing from which they made their bold raids on the stages running to and from Leadville.

The glade was walled in by cliffs which rendered its discovery almost a matter of accident. The avenue through which they had entered was well hidden by bushes and trees; and around all was reared an apparently impassable barrier of low mountains. To his mind no better place for their uses could have been found in scores of miles.

Thinking thus he was led to the belief that they intended to remain there indefinitely, and that the best thing he could do was to get back to the camp as fast as he could and lead a force against them.

"I'll just be runnin' my neck into a halter by stayin' hyer!" he argued, as he carefully turned the question over in his mind. "As soon as day opens 'twon't be much trouble to smell me out, if they sh'd onc't take it into their heads that any one's foller'd 'em. And by goin' back to town I kin bring up enough men to caper the hull b'ilin'."

Thus bubbling over with the idea of effecting an easy capture of the thieves who had so long infested the Leadville trails, Socorro hitched slowly backward from his rather exposed post of observation. In doing so a branch broke beneath him with a crack like a rifle-shot.

There was instant excitement and alarm in the camp. Some of the outlaws ran for their horses, supposing an attack to be impending, and others seized their weapons.

"Now I *hev* done it!" Socorro groaned in deep disgust. "Waked up a reg'lar ole hornets' nest!"

"What was it?" asked one who was evidently the commander, coming into the midst of his panic-stricken followers.

"Cussed ef we know!" came the reply, reaching the ears of the concealed spy with great distinctness, so near was he to the speaker.

This was succeeded by a low-spoken command on the part of the leader, in obedience to which some of the men deployed like a skirmish line and moved toward the low slope where Socorro was hidden.

This movement was so full of peril to Socorro that he wriggled carefully to one side, using all the arts of which he was capable to prevent a single sound reaching them. They were half-way up the slope by the time this was accomplished, and the hunted man, crouching low in the gloom of a boulder, waited with drawn weapons for the discovery that seemed almost inevitable.

But the deploying party passed him by and continued to a point somewhat higher, leaving him free to breathe once more.

Then, having gained the summit of the knoll, they returned in the same cautious way, looking everywhere for their concealed foe. They were looking closer this time, and one of them chanced to see Socorro as he crouched behind the boulder.

"There's somethin'," he whispered, his voice tremulous with the importance of the discovery. "It's either a man or a bear!"

Further delay was the very essence of suicide; and, realizing it, Socorro leaped to his feet and ran like a deer.

There was an instant blaze of fire along the whole line, the balls singing and screeching about the runner's ears in a way to add wings to his feet. But not a ball touched him, so excited were the marksmen and so uncertain the light.

"After him!" yelled the chief, who was still in the glade. "Don't let him get away!"

A hot chase ensued, but Socorro, realizing that he was running for his life, exerted all his matchless speed and cunning in doubling and dodging, and soon left his pursuers so far behind that their chances of overtaking him seemed few.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A COWARDLY ATTACK.

In following the thread of this story it becomes necessary to take a retrospective glance at the doings of certain other characters with whose acts it is concerned.

The speech of Jasper Nolan at the incendiary meeting held by the proposed strikers did not in the least tend to make them feel kindly toward him. The anger and distrust with which they had previously regarded him were vastly deepened and intensified, and had he heard the charges and innuendoes that were whispered

against him he must certainly have felt that his life was in peril.

He knew nothing of all this, however, and went his way in peace, troubled only by the well-grounded fear that the self-appointed leaders of the workingmen would yet lead them to deeds of violence and outrage.

Meeting Kansas Karl on the street the day succeeding the meeting, and being now well acquainted with the great detective, though of course not with his real character and business, he laid before him the events that had so recently transpired, and told him of the fears that troubled him.

Kansas Karl had also been watching the leaders of the agitators, and had a pretty fair idea of their aims and acts, but of this he said nothing to Nolan.

"There's bound to come evil out of it," Nolan declared, with an apprehensive look. "There are certainly two sides to the question. If the workingmen were wholly in the wrong it might be possible to reason with them and get them to moderate their demands. But the bosses are as stubborn as the men, and seem determined not to give an inch. There are certain inequalities and wrongs which if they would right, I believe all might be well yet!"

"And you think I may be able to exert some influence over them in that direction?"

"That's my idea, Mr. Kennedy. I have been told you are on terms of intimacy with Mr. Taggart, and a word in the right place might have great effect there. Mr. Taggart is known to be one of the leading spirits in the organization which the bosses have effected, and if he could be made to see the matter in its proper aspect he would readily understand that conciliation is better and safer than the course they have marked out."

"I'll talk with him," promised Kennedy; and set out forthwith for Mr. Taggart's office.

To his regret he found the broker in no very amiable mood for the discussion of the question. Spies had reported to him something of what had occurred at the meeting attended by Socorro Sam. The reports had made him savage and moody, and when Kennedy entered he was pacing up and down the apartment, his brows knitted and his hands clinched tightly behind his back.

"Good-morning," he growled, motioning the detective to a chair. "These infernal miners have put me all out of temper. They become more insolent every day. My advice to the committee would be to plant cannon in the streets, and when the dogs show their teeth mow them down like the beasts that they are."

Kansas Karl had never seen him in so ugly a temper, and was consequently very much surprised therat.

"The very worst policy in the world!" he ventured to remonstrate. "It would madden them so that, in my opinion, they would burn the town."

Taggart looked at him curiously, as if doubting the sincerity of his oft-expressed friendship.

"I have just had a talk with a miner, whose opinions I regard very highly, and it is his belief that if the bosses would show a kindly disposition toward the men and equalize certain inequalities in the pay, the trouble which now threatens could be averted."

"And who is this Daniel come to judgment?" Taggart sneered.

"Jasper Nolan!"

"Ah!" the exclamation issuing from his lips like a snarl. "I might have known as much! You will pardon me if I refuse to consider Nolan very good authority."

"I'm sorry you think so," in a tone evincing much surprise. "I have come to regard him as a man of considerable discernment and most excellent judgment; and I have every reason to believe his opinions on this subject are entitled to consideration. He can have no reason for speaking anything but the truth, it seems to me! 'Perhaps you don't know Jasper Nolan as I do!'

"That is quite possible, Mr. Taggart, inasmuch as you've been here the longest. I have thought him, however, an industrious workman and an honest man; and thinking that, I intended to ask a favor of you in his behalf. Feeling as you do, though, I suppose you will not wish to grant it."

"What is it?" and the frown deepened.

"That you give him a position at your mine or smelter where the work will not be too heavy for his strength, which has not fully returned to him since that attack of fever. You offered a position to his son, which the latter would not accept, feeling that to do so would be like taking pay for a wholly unselfish deed; and that offer put into my mind the idea of this request."

"I suppose Nolan didn't ask you to do anything of the kind?"

Kennedy flushed under the imputation implied in the tone and words.

"No, sir! Nothing of the sort was ever hinted by him."

Taggart's manner softened a little at this exhibition of temper.

"I can't do it!" he declared, however. "I consider Jasper Nolan a sneak and a treacherous dog generally, and I can't consent to give him a

place under any consideration. As he knows nothing or your application you need not tell him this, though, for I don't care to have his anger roused against me."

"I'll not mention it," Karl answered, rising to terminate the interview, which was every moment becoming more strained. "I'm sorry we can't look at matters in the same light. Good-morning!"

He bowed himself out, with a smile on his lips, and made his way down-town, wondering at the change that had come over Taggart since he last conversed with him.

"He seems to be nursing an unreasonable and uncontrollable rage and to be directing its venom largely at Jasper Nolan. I can't understand it. I never dreamed that Tressie's father could develop into such a bear."

Jasper Nolan, whom he had left standing in the street, was destined to experiences equally disagreeable, and with the element of personal danger added. His conversation with Kansas Karl had been noted by jealous eyes, and quickly reported to those who already regarded him with hatred and suspicion.

It was the universal belief, founded on observation, that Kansas Karl and Taggart were friends and confidants, if not allies. Taggart had taken him to his own house when he had been wounded, and since that time they had been frequently seen together. What conclusion was then more natural than the one arrived at by the spies of the workingmen: that Nolan was reporting to Taggart, through Kansas Karl, the results of the late meeting? And the proof of this seemed conclusive when the detective was seen to go at once to the office of the hated mine boss.

Little account was taken of the circumstance that this interview was had in the open street and in the broad light of day, which would hardly have been the case if their idea of its character had been the correct one.

After the detective's departure, Nolan stood for a long time lost in thought and apparently oblivious to what was occurring about him. Then, as if aroused from a stupor, he turned into a side street leading homeward, continuing his meditations as he walked.

His movements had been closely observed by his enraged enemies, and when at the most deserted point of the obscure and narrow way, a half-dozen disguised men leaped on him.

The attack was so unexpected that he was overwhelmed and borne backward before he could lift a hand in defense. Then they cuffed and kicked him into a state of insensibility, hurrying away and leaving him lying there at last when they began to fear they had killed him.

And there he was found a few minutes later by Kansas Karl, who was hastening along this side street toward the Nolan cottage.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN AWKWARD SITUATION.

WHEN the detective, by dint of patience and skill, had succeeded in restoring the unfortunate man to consciousness, he half led and half carried him to the house, which was luckily not far away. Nolan's injuries were of a painful character, but there were no bones broken; and, having assured himself of this, Kansas Karl hurried back to his rooms in the hotel he had some time before selected.

He was anxious to be alone that he might give himself up to a careful study of many things that seemed on the point of development.

Since coming to Leadville he had been more than busy. With a patience that was untiring and a skill that was full of the craft of his profession he had been gathering and weaving together the scattered threads of what seemed destined to prove a marvelously checkered career of crime and chicanery. And he already began to realize that the single clew which at the outset he had been following was leading him into a very tangle of circumstances, the mazy depths of which were as yet unexplorable.

As he brooded over these things his thoughts took a pleasanter channel and he began to dream of the daughter of the rich mine-owner. She had been much in his thoughts of late. He had often tried to account for the persistency with which his mind reverted to her on the theory that having been so much with her it could not well be otherwise. But that the theory was false he secretly felt, even while cherishing it.

He had remained at Taggart's, as has been more than hinted, till he could no longer find a reasonable excuse for so doing; and since making his headquarters at the hotel his visits to the mansion had not been infrequent. Both father and daughter treated him with uniform kindness, but he had become aware of a certain shyness on Tressie's part, recently.

He began to hope that this might be an indication of growing love for him. At the same time it dawned on him that his feeling for her was stronger than mere friendship. And with this realization came a fervent trust that she really cared something for him, and an earnest desire to make himself worthy of her.

He called on Madame Marsden occasionally, but her beauty had ceased to charm. His visits were more in the line of business, for he had, at

her request, undertaken the execution of certain small business commissions. She was as dazzling as formerly, as smiling and as quick at repartee; but her splendid tropical beauty and her scintillations of sparkling wit began some way to pall on him.

As these thoughts chased each other in a disconnected way through his mind, there came a tap on the door of his room, and he opened it to find Madame Marsden on the threshold.

One window of the apartment commanded a view of the long corridor leading to it, but he had been so absorbed in his meditations that he had not seen her as she swept along this in her queenly, imperious way.

"Another little business matter with which I must bother you, Mr. Kennedy!" she cried, deprecatingly, as he invited her to enter.

"It will be no bother to me, I assure you," returning the smile.

She sunk into an easy-chair at the window mentioned, and settled herself in a posture of careless grace.

As she did so, the disagreeable impression came to him that her manner partook somewhat of that of the theatrical stage. This impression had arisen unbidden more than once before, and had been as promptly banished to the region of forgetfulness.

He did not inquire the exact nature of her errand, and she, seeming to forget herself, began a conversation that led into fields wholly disconnected from business.

The truth was, her pretended errand was but a subterfuge, an excuse to enable her to gain the attention of his ear and eye. Knowing and fearing him as she did, her reasons can be readily seen. If she could insnare him with her beauty and wit, it would be a repetition of the shearing of Samson by Delilah. This was the task she had set herself, and to which she had bent every energy since the memorable day of the stage robbery. And, blinded by vanity, she believed she was already becoming mistress of the situation, and that the great detective was almost within her power.

"It really seems that I'm never to be able to get away from here," she chattered, volubly.

"One thing and another arises to keep me here day after day! Ah, well! I don't know that I care. I'm beginning to like this place as I never dreamed it would be possible for me to do; and since you managed to exchange those stocks so successfully, I have an income that enables me to live very well. That was a splendid stroke of business genius!"

Kansas Karl had found an opportunity to trade the shares she held in the Blue Bird Mine for others which had since become of considerable value, and this was what she referred to.

"I did the very best I could," he said, modestly. "The Blue Bird was worthless."

"And yet, when you knew that at the very start, you wouldn't tell me so! It would have crushed me, though, I suppose, if you had!"

She wiped a suspicious bit of moisture from her eyes, flirting out the costly lace handkerchief as she did so, to show what a gem it was.

At that moment a look of triumph and jealousy strangely mingled swept like a shadow across her face. She had been glancing into the bit of the street which the corridor revealed, and her face being thus turned from him, Kansas Karl saw nothing of the look.

"But I mustn't detain you," she declared, a sudden tremulousness coming into her voice. "I came to see if you could not find a buyer for this."

She tapped a gem-crusted pin which shone with a snaky glitter against the softness and delicacy of her throat.

"Why should you want to sell it?" he cried.

"That isn't to the point, Mr. Kennedy. Come near and take a good look at it, and tell me what it is worth!"

Wondering at her manner, he complied, bending over her as she half reclined in the large chair before the window.

While thus closely scrutinizing the pin, the sound of a light footfall came to him, accompanied as it seemed by a gasp or a sigh of pain, and looking quickly up he saw Tressie standing at the head of the stairway. There was that on her face he could never forget. A shadow on the fair, young brow, a scared, horrified light in the sweet and thoughtful eyes, a drawing of the lips as if with sudden pain!

Even as his eye caught sight of the swaying figure and agonized face of the broker's daughter, she was gone; and he heard the light footsteps as they passed into the street.

"What is it?" asked the madame, sweetly. "You seem to be startled! You have never seen the pin before, have you? I purchased it only last week, of a lady who has recently come from Denver."

He scarcely heard the query. All his mind had centered itself on the recollection of the startled and hurt face that had just passed beyond his sight.

"I—really don't know what the pin is worth?" he managed to stammer. "More, doubtless, than you can get for it here. I would advise against its sale."

He drew himself away from her, having step-

ped back in a startled manner when he saw Tressie.

"You—you will really have to pardon me, Mrs. Marsden!" he cried, his distress showing in his tones. "I don't want to seem rude, but I have an engagement which will permit me to delay no longer. If you can call some other time I'll see what can be done about the sale of the pin. But, now, I must beg you to excuse me!"

He took down his hat from its peg on the wall. She arose to go, staring at him as if she could not understand the quick change in his demeanor.

"I trust I have done nothing to offend?" she faltered.

"Nothing at all, my dear Mrs. Marsden. Disabuse your mind of any such idea. Some other time I may be able to explain. Just now you will pardon me for any seeming rudeness; and believe me it is not intentional, whatever the appearances.

He opened the door and bowed her out into the hallway; and then, having seen her start away in one direction, he took the opposite, hurrying around a block with a stride that betrayed how great was his nervousness and perturbation of spirit.

All at once he stopped; stopped as a man will who runs suddenly and unexpectedly against a stone wall.

"Now, I wonder if that could be possible?" he mused, clutching at his necktie as if its tightness choked and stifled him. "Did Madame Marsden see her before I did and get me to assume that attitude on purpose? Strange I never thought of that till now!"

His thoughts became hazy and incoherent as the tremendous suspicion swept over him. The world grew black and reeling as when the blast of the tempest drives the tangled storm-clouds across the sky. But the reaction came almost instantly; and as the clouds began to lift and he could look behind their angry edges the sunlight of clearer comprehension streamed in.

"Ah!" and the exclamation came with a stinging, rasping sound. "It was clever of the madame, and very well done! I'll not forget it! And the cause! Can it have been jealousy? It looks that way, sure; and yet I don't believe it. Well, whatever the motive, I'll discover it before another week passes above my head!"

He went forward again, but this time with a certain resolution and firmness that proclaimed he had come to a decision from which nothing could swerve him.

On reaching the corner of the next street, he turned in the direction of the Taggart residence. It was not far distant, and almost before he had time to shape his thoughts he found himself before the door.

He rung, however, without hesitation, and sent up a card on which he had penciled a few hasty lines.

The servant soon came back with the reply that Miss Taggart would see him; and he was ushered into the cozy parlor, where he had not long to await her appearance.

There was a noticeable vividness of color in her face when she entered, and her eyes held a feverish brightness not at all pleasant to see. There was an evident effort on her part, however, to conceal all traces of emotion, and to assume toward him her usual kindly manner.

Karl thought he divined her feelings and motives.

"You called to see me awhile ago?" he questioned, after an interval of embarrassing silence.

She inclined her head in response, but said nothing.

At this the detective's customary calm, which had been wavering on the point of flight, completely forsook him. For a full minute he sat with eyes fixed on the floor, one hand toying nervously with the guard of his watch and the fingers of the other flecking aimlessly at some spot of dust on his clothing.

"I don't just know how to approach the subject which brought me here," he confessed at last, with an uneasy quaver quite at variance with the genial ease that characterized him. "I came down, though, to say that you wholly misunderstood the meaning of my attitude, which you must have observed when you came into the corridor."

She looked at him, as if to question what all this was to her.

"You *must* understand me!" he declared, rising quickly and coming close to her side. "Forgive me, Tressie, dear, for saying it, but I love you! Love you with every fiber of my being! And—and—"

"What was the meaning of that, then?" she questioned, whitening to the hue of the lily, and then reddening to the color of the rose.

He understood the confession that unwittingly revealed itself between the words, and with a swift movement caught her about the waist and strained her to his wildly-throbbing heart.

"Oh, my dear!" he panted. "You love me, I know you do! And nothing shall ever tear us asunder. I declare to you that as far as that woman is concerned, I am as free as the birds of heaven, and as guiltless."

She had yielded to his embrace, and was now sobbing passionately on his bosom. And while

he strove to soothe and calm her, he hastily explained away the false notion she had gained by that one glance through the corridor window.

"And you do love me?" he whispered, drawing her closer to him.

And light as the summer breeze came the answer:

"Better, Charles, than my own life!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE SPHINX'S DOUBLE.

WHY had Madame Marsden sought to place him in a false light before the woman he loved? It was a question that came back to Kansas Karl again and again, and for which he could not find a wholly adequate reply, though suggestions, some of them very near the truth, flocked to him thick as autumn-blown thistle-down. Jealousy might account for it; but other things kept driving him from the acceptance of this theory and forcing him to wander in a circle of conjecture that seemed altogether fruitless.

He did not allow this inquiry to disturb the work he had so resolutely set himself to accomplish. Nothing might interfere with that, not even love-making and its consequent rapture and dreams. He had come there to accomplish a set purpose; and once he had put his hand to the plow, he never looked backward to enjoy pleasure or escape pain and peril.

He had learned from Tressie that she had sought him at his office for the purpose of conferring with him concerning a way to aid the Nolans without at the same time letting them see the hand which extended the favor. He could not bear to tell her how her father had spoken of Nolan when application was made to him to give Jasper a place. She knew nothing of the harshness which Taggart showed in his dealings with his fellow-men, and Kansas Karl determined that he would be the last to open her eyes to the truth of her father's character in that respect.

However, a little sum was raised for Jasper, the most of the money being paid by the detective and by Tressie out of her own private purse—and this small amount was conveyed to him by a fellow-workman, who represented that it had been raised among the "boys" as a token of their kindly feelings and sympathy. Being thus presented, he could not readily refuse it, and it enabled Kitty to procure for him many delicacies he could not otherwise have had.

Karl, having been convinced from the first that the disguised gambler was the man he was seeking, had shadowed that mysterious individual persistently. After the duel the Sphinx was not seen at his customary place at the gaming-table for several successive nights. Probably his injuries kept him away, though the detective could not bring himself to believe them that severe. He was confident of the accuracy of his aim that night, and the glance he had had of the wound told him it would not prove a serious affair. Nevertheless, the Sphinx remained away, and the general opinion was that it was because of the scalp-wound he had received.

But he returned at last, and resumed his old place and occupation. Kansas Karl did not again try the plan first attempted. After watching the man in various disguises, he became convinced that the gambler never left the place in the person of the Black Sphinx. It seemed equally clear to him that no man would care to remain shut up in his rooms all the time when not at the gaming-tables.

The actions of the men who witnessed the duel showed with equal conclusiveness that whoever the Sphinx might be, he had many friends in and about the Lode Star, so that it seemed necessary to do all the shadowing himself and trust the secrets of his thoughts and motives to no one, lest they might come to the ears of the very man he was after.

Pondering all these matters over, he at last hit upon a plan that appeared to offer a show of success. Following it out, he disguised himself as the Sphinx's double, masking his identity so completely that the gambler's most intimate friends, seeing this false Sphinx, must have been deceived as to his personality. There were the same black clothes, the same ebony weapons and silk half-mask, with the brown mustache showing beneath it.

The plan he mapped out was extremely bold, daring, and original, and to carry it out successfully required much tact. It had taken many nights of careful watching to locate the gambler's room, but this had been accomplished. It was at the head of a winding stairway, and could only be reached by passing first through the cook-room of the establishment. That there was a design in this singular choice of location, Kansas Karl firmly believed. By having the cook in his confidence and pay, inquisitive visitors could be kept at a distance, and the Black Sphinx could snap his fingers at any who wished to burrow into his secrets.

The difficult part of the detective's task was to pass in safety through this cook-room. It could only be done while the Sphinx was engaged in play.

Nevertheless, Karl, hesitating at no difficulty, determined to make the attempt, and, disguised

as the double of the mysterious gambler, he made his way one dark night to the door of the Lode Star.

It was late, and the gaming at the different tables had reached a feverish intensity that centered nearly all eyes on the gamblers. Taking advantage of this, he entered the room by a side entrance. From the front of the apartment it was difficult to determine whether or not the Sphinx formed one of the group at the principal table, at which he usually sat.

With a bold stride, therefore, the detective walked past the long bar and toward the cook-room. It was a moment of breathless expectancy. Should he be detected, or even a guess hazarded by the barkeeper that he was not what he seemed, the result would be disastrous in the extreme.

The very boldness of the movement, however, carried him safely through this first ordeal. The barkeeper stared questioningly, wondering, no doubt, why the Sphinx should ascend so early to his room. But the Sphinx was not a man to question lightly, and he kept his thoughts to himself.

The greatest test of the fidelity and accuracy of the disguise was yet to come; and Kansas Karl could not suppress a little tremor of nervousness as he stepped into the cook-room and bent his steps toward the stairway. But the cook, absorbed in his work, never gave him a second glance; and a moment later the disguised detective was silently mounting the stairway.

He had no idea of what he might or might not find above stairs. There might be traps innumerable to trip up and expose any one daring enough to venture there. He endeavored to keep his eyes open, though many pitfalls might have lain hidden in the somber shadows that surrounded his footsteps.

When the room at the head of the stairway had been gained he drew a bunch of keys from his pocket, and after many trials succeeded in fitting one to the lock of the door. For aught he knew there was no way of egress from the place except by the route he had come; and as he fumbled at the lock he could not help reflecting as to the course he should pursue should sudden discovery overtake him. The thoughts engendered by the inquiry were by no means pleasant, for he realized that if found there he would in all probability have to fight for his life, with the chances largely against him.

Pushing the door noiselessly open, he entered the little room. Then, having closed the door after him, he struck a match and looked about. At first glance the place seemed much the same as any ordinary bedroom. It contained a small table, a cot, a few chairs, and a dresser. But all the belongings bore unmistakable evidence of having been little used, which appeared to be a most singular circumstance.

He had time but to make a hasty and superficial survey when a commotion arose below, and he blew out the match, waiting anxiously to see what it portended. The disturbance ceasing almost immediately, he lighted another match and began to look more closely.

He felt that surely there must be another way out of there, and with this thought uppermost made the search. With the butt of a revolver he sounded the walls to discover if possible a hidden door.

Leaving the room he re-entered the corridor, and here, by sounding the walls, he found what he sought. A hidden door at the corridor's end opened on a descending stairway! This door, after many trials, he succeeded in opening.

Of course, in all this, considerable time was consumed, and many matches burned, the charred fragments of which he had gathered up and thrust into his pockets.

Closing the door after him, he found himself in Stygian darkness. To guard against a mishap he produced and struck yet another match, and, guided by its feeble light, moved stealthily down the steps.

The flight was not long, and he soon found himself standing before the lower door. This he unlocked, as he had unlocked the one above, and when it swung backward, the starlight of the outer world shone on him, and the wind from the mountains fanned his heated cheeks.

He had emerged at the rear of the Lode Star, in an angle of the building seldom visited, and where he had not before known there was a door. And as he stepped out and turned the key again in the lock, he saw that the door was framed in the flat surface of the wall, and so painted that its presence could only be detected by the closest scrutiny. Some trailing vines grew over it, and assisted in the concealment, and the lock was covered with a drop block that seemed merely an ornament of the angle.

"Quite a cunning scheme!" mused Karl, breathing more freely, now that he had accomplished his purpose safely and successfully. "I should never have dreamed of seeking Mr. Sphinx here. As I thought, he does not stay in that room all the time, but uses it as a blind to more thoroughly conceal his identity. Now, if the barkeeper or the cook don't drop onto the little game I've played to-night, I may be able to make some telling discoveries!"

Communing thus with himself, he sought a convenient post of observation, and began a

patient watch for the coming of the man he had so long been shadowing.

The hour was late and the coming was not delayed. Evidently neither the barkeeper nor the cook had paid sufficient heed to him to observe that he had not returned to the gaming-room. Perhaps they were so accustomed to the comings and goings of the Sphinx along the route the detective had followed, that they really had thought little of the matter when the latter ascended the stairway.

Thus crouching in wait, the detective heard light footsteps beyond the hidden doorway. The next moment the door swung open, and a man stepped into the starlight. If it was the Sphinx, he had doffed the black apparel and mask. This the detective could see with small effort.

Then the man stepped away from the building, and though the light was faint the shadower saw the face plainly.

It was the face of Andrew Jackson Taggart!

CHAPTER XXI.

IN THE GRIP OF THE FOE.

A GASP of surprise and almost of incredulity arose to the detective's lips. So great in fact was his astonishment that he came near betraying himself. Could his eyes have deceived him? He knew, as he recalled the features revealed momentarily, that they had not. The man who had come through the doorway and down the stairway from the Sphinx's room was none other than Taggart, the father of the woman he loved!

A deep groan escaped him as the form disappeared in the darkness.

"That just goes beyond all my figures!" he declared, rising to follow the man, so that whatever of doubt lingered might be forever dispelled. "My shrewdest guesses would never have hit that mark. And yet I suppose it's because of his kindness to me and the love I have felt for his daughter. My God! What is to be the end of this trial? If I run him to earth and arrest him as the murderer and robber, Buck Tolliver, it will turn Tressie against me and break her heart!"

Hoping that he might, after all, be mistaken, yet feeling sure he was not, he shadowed the form that flitted so darkly through the gloom before him, until it ascended the steps and disappeared silently within the Taggart residence. The doubt could exist no longer; and if appearances proved anything it was that the man he had come to Leadville to search out was Taggart, the broker and mine-owner.

His brain was in a whirl as he stumbled back to his room in the hotel, after divesting himself of his disguises. And when he had gained its seclusion he sat till near morning, pondering on the remarkable disclosure which had crowned the night's work. And as he thought, his mind recalled every event connected with Taggart and the Sphinx which he had experienced or which had become known to him.

He went over in detail the recollections of the days immediately succeeding the duel, and these memories served but to show how he had been blinded by the man's kindness and by the feelings cherished for the daughter. As Kansas Karl had believed, Taggart had not been seriously hurt by the bullet that plowed its way along the side of his head. When the detective visited father and daughter, the evening after the fight, Taggart complained of an attack of illness that had prevented him from attending to his business duties; and in that manner had accounted to the satisfaction both of Kennedy and Tressie for the pallor of his face and the unsteadiness of his gait.

But Taggart as the Black Sphinx had not appeared at the Lode Star for a number of nights, and in this showed himself a master strategist. For if any one had suspected that Taggart was thus masquerading, this circumstance would have tended to dispel the idea.

The thought that tortured Karl almost to madness, however, was that Buck Tolliver was thus shown to be the father of the woman he so passionately loved, and that he could not strike at the game, now he had flushed it, without at the same time hitting her.

He had expected on the morning which was now dawning to go boldly to the broker and ask the hand of his daughter in marriage. Could he do it, now, knowing what he did? And how should he deport himself toward Tressie with this heavy secret weighing on his mind? Could he still make love to a woman whose happiness it seemed his bounden duty to destroy?

If not, what should he do? He could not give her up! And under the circumstances, it seemed equally impossible for him to go ahead in the path he had marked out.

As he thus sat, his mind tortured to the verge of madness and turning again and again on the self-same track like a hunted fox, a series of heavy knocks seemed to shatter the very door.

So absorbed had he been he had heard no one ascend to his apartment. Wondering who his untimely visitor could be, he opened the door, and Socorro Sam glided into the little room. He was covered with the dust and grime of travel, and seemed on the point of exhaustion.

"Why, what does this mean?" Kansas Karl gasped, starting back as he took in the details of Socorro's features and clothing.

"Who was it was robbed to-night?" the exhausted man demanded. "Tell me who it was an' I'll tell where the robbers air."

"Robbed! I haven't heard anything of a robbery."

Socorro Sam persisted, however, that a robbery had been committed, and then hastily detailed his experiences of the night from the moment of discovering the men sneaking from the town with their heavy burdens up to and including his return trip.

Broad day came while they sat discussing Socorro's strange story, and Karl, glad of something to turn his thoughts from the unpleasant channels they had been pursuing, expressed his willingness to follow Socorro's lead in whatever the latter might wish to undertake.

Sallying into the streets, they went to the headquarters of the town marshal, where Socorro repeated his tale, with the result that a small company of well-armed men were placed under his guidance whose duty it was to visit the place where he had last seen the villains and bring them in dead or alive.

Inquiries were also set on foot to discover what building or buildings, if any, had been burglarized. But up to the time that Socorro's force left the town this had not been revealed. And it was not revealed until the party under Jasper Nolan, who had partially recovered from the effects of his recent beating, visited the Sexton Brothers' store room to learn why Tom had so long delayed his coming.

With this strong force Socorro and Kansas Karl set out to apprehend if possible the bold raiders who had so quietly and successfully accomplished the robbery of the night.

Socorro and the detective had met frequently since the night of the duel and the acquaintance thus strangely begun had ripened into something like intimacy. Besides, the keen-witted ex-scout had more than half guessed the line of business in which Kennedy was engaged; and this it was that had led him to seek the detective so promptly on returning to town.

Exhausted as he was by the long run to and from the camp and by the excitement through which he had passed, Socorro yet pushed the party forward in vigorous fashion, sparing neither himself nor the horses in his anxiety to come up with the robbers before they should vacate their position.

But, though he rode so furiously, when he reached the glade where he had last seen them it was found silent and deserted.

A hasty examination showed that the trail left by the fleeing men was so faint that a long and arduous pursuit must be undertaken. This the men who had been placed under him were unwilling to attempt, alleging that in coming thus far they had obeyed the commands laid on them and to go further would be to violate the spirit of their instructions.

Socorro raved at them when they communicated this as their conception of their duties. But his raving, backed even by the arguments of Kansas Karl, had no effect, and the men rode away in the direction of the camp.

"The cowards!" Socorro gritted; "they're on'y afraid they may run ag'in' the agents if they continner on. I reckon that's somethin' they hain't a-hankera' for overmuchly, even if they did start out with the'r noses in the air. Them fellers makes me think of some dogs. They'll bark tremenjus so long as t'other dog is a goodish ways off, but when he gits clost enough to begin to grin and bristle, they tuck the'r tails between the'r legs an' run'sif fer their lives."

It did seem that Socorro was right in his surmise and that the unfavorable parallel was fully justified by their actions.

"Well, what are we to do?" Karl asked, when the last of the force had disappeared. "We can't hope to do anything with the road-agents, even if we pursue them."

"That's right! We can't pull 'em, mebbe, but we kin see where they're gone to."

Fastening his horse to a small tree, Socorro began to run about the outskirts of the valley like a pointer dog scenting out the faint odor left by a passing flock of game birds.

All at once he elevated his nose in the air, and gave a peculiar and far-reaching whistle.

"Discovered something, have you?" Karl asked, hurrying to his side. "What is it?"

Socorro pointed silently to the earth, where, in the long grass, lay a bar of bullion.

"They've rifled one of the storage-rooms," said the detective, and he picked up the dully-shining piece of metal to examine it more closely.

An exclamation escaped him as he turned it over and beheld the stamp of the Sexton Brothers' smelter, showing whose ore it was.

"Do you see that? They've got the better of Tom Nolan in some way. Killed him, perhaps. And then they've robbed the building. But, I shouldn't think they could carry away much of that stuff!" the detective declared. "A very little of it makes a mighty big load."

"An' they had big loads," averred Socorro. "You ort 'a' seen 'em bend under 'em. An' there was a hull wheen o' the devils, too. I s'pose men could carry away everything that's in the Philadelphia Mint, if they was on'y 'nough of 'em."

Talking thus they hurried along under the

shadows of the trees and bluffs, scanning the faint hoof-prints visible here and there, and speculating as to the fate of Tom Nolan.

While doing so they were startled by the loud command: "Throw up your hands!" and saw that they had walked almost into the very midst of the men they were searching for!

CHAPTER XXII.

THE STUFF OF HEROES.

No sooner was the command given, however, than Sam, who was in the advance, leaped quickly into the thick screen of trees at the side of the trail, and with a cry for the detective to follow, dashed recklessly away.

The movement was so suddenly and unexpectedly made that the outlaws were thrown into confusion, and before they could recover and open fire on the fleeing man he had gained considerable distance and headway.

Karl endeavored to follow Socorro's daring example, and for a short time it seemed as if both would escape, if not cut down by the bullets that were being sent after them. But, while dashing through the timber in the direction of their horses, he was tripped by a fallen branch and tumbled headlong. Before he could rise, the pursuing road agents were upon him and he was a prisoner!

Sam, however, succeeded in gaining his steed and making his escape, to the no small chagrin and disgust of his chasers.

He halted for an instant on a knoll, after he had mounted and when just out of gunshot, and from this vantage point Socorro saw Karl bound and surrounded by the enraged canyon cohort.

"If I had just five good men," he hissed, "I'd go back and teach them skunks a lesson. If them cowardly scamps what come with us had 'a' stayed, this wouldn't never 'a' happened, and if it had we could 'a' turned on them chaps and rounded 'em up most beautiful!"

But he could do nothing single-handed, and seeing a number of men appear from the hollow over against the opposite crest, he concluded that to beat a retreat was the safest and wisest thing he could do.

Nevertheless, he could not resist the temptation to turn in his saddle, even after the horsemen had begun their pursuit, and send back a defiant yell.

Then bending low on the neck of his steed to avoid any flying bullets, should the outlaws chance to have weapons of such range, he urged the willing horse into its best gait. And after him streamed the road-agents, using every effort to overtake him before he reached the vicinity of the camp.

Socorro hoped the men he had brought out that morning might be sighted soon, as they had started off in a very leisurely way; and by taking command and rallying them he could turn the tables on his pursuers and even rescue Karl. But, it required a ride of less than a mile to show that the hope was fallacious. They were not to be seen on the long stretch of road that now lay before, and every indication showed that as soon as out of sight of Socorro and Kennedy they had galloped back to the security of the camp.

Down this highway the road-agents thundered, mile after mile, keeping just near enough to Socorro to lead them to hope they might eventually overhaul him. But, the town drew near, and Socorro urged his horse to still greater efforts, and soon left them in the rear.

There had been method in his seeming madness. He knew the steed which bore him was equal to greater speed than that of any of those ridden by the outlaws, and he had been endeavoring to draw the rascals so near to the town that a quick and bold dash, while their horses were fagged, would effect their capture, provided always that he could find men nervy enough to make that dash.

The road-agents saw the trap he was endeavoring to lead them into in time to escape it; and realizing that all chance of overhauling him was now at an end, they drew rein and hurried away in the direction from whence they had come.

Notwithstanding the dashing of this desire, Socorro Sam hastened on into the camp, turning over in his mind various plans for the detective's rescue.

His greatest fear was that the road-agent might know the character of the man they had captured and put him to death.

"An' it won't do any good to go back there with a mob," he soliloquized. "The skunks won't stay there twenty minutes after what has happened, I'll be bound. 'Ud be fools if they did; an' the chap that's at the head of 'em ain't a fool whatever he is. I feel lack jist buttin' my fool brains out ag'in' a stone wall. The idee o' me—Socorro Sam—what's trailed agents an' Injuns ever since I was a purp, pokin' my nose into a trap lack that 'thout ever seein' of it er dreamin' it was there. It actilly makes me sick!"

That Socorro's disgust was deep and intense could never have been doubted by any one chancing to see him at that moment. He glared wolfishly along the backward trail, his brows so knit and his eyes so fierce that he seemed the

very genius and embodiment of outlawry itself.

Then, with an angry light on his face and a last vindictive shake of his clinched hand in the direction taken by his late pursuers, he turned toward town, and galloped on in a very thoughtful mood. His first impulse was to visit the authorities as he had done that morning in company with Kansas Karl. But many points against this crowded on him.

There seemed no reason why he should take time to make a personal report, he argued. The party sent out with him would attend to that; and what they said of the result of the short campaign and what the officials might think about it or do about it were to him matters of small consequence.

He had not only failed to capture the robbers, but had exposed Kansas Karl to such peril as he scarcely dared think of; for all of which he lashed himself cruelly, taking all the blame of the mishap to himself.

To retrieve the error of the morning was now his sole thought. It appeared clear that this could not be done by leading a large party again in pursuit. The road-agents, with their knowledge of the hills and the advantages given them by the numerous canyons and gorges, could elude such an outfit with comparative ease. The attempt would be too much like hunting mountain sheep with a brass band.

"There'll ha' to be some creepin' an' crawlin' an' snoopin' about," he muttered, as he thus revolved the subject. "An' likely some tough trailin'. I'll be obligeed either to go it alone or take somebody I kin tie to. An' that somebody I low'll ha' to be Yankee Jake."

Having reached this conclusion and gained the town at the same time, he clattered down the street to Jake's boarding-house, where he learned something of the particulars of the robbery and of the injury which Tillotson had received.

Leaving his horse hitched to a post in front of this house, he made his way speedily to the Nolan residence, where he found Jake sitting up in bed, white-faced but smiling and comfortable in spite of his pain.

Tom Nolan was also at home, as was Jasper, who was limping still and walking with the aid of a cane.

It did not take Socorro Sam long to divest himself of the great burden of news he bore. It was a remarkable tale, though, he had to tell, and one which roused the blood in the veins of his hearers.

As he listened to the trailer's running comments Tom Nolan's countenance would have furnished an excellent study for those who believe that thoughts are revealed by facial expression.

The attentive reader must have guessed long before this that young Nolan held more than a kindly feeling in his heart for Taggart's lovely daughter. He loved her with a passionate ardor that was intensified perhaps by the knowledge that it was altogether a foolish and hopeless passion. And this love, cherished in secret, and hidden as he believed from the knowledge of his most intimate friends and acquaintances, had had a marked influence on his life and character. It tugged at his heart-strings and surged to his lips demanding voice and utterance. Yet, feeling the immensity of the gulf that separated him from the woman he worshiped, he held it firmly in leash and gave no sigh. But the hideous blotch on his face grew every day more hateful to him, and the chains of poverty every day more galling.

He told himself constantly that he was not worthy of her, and that he must drive this foolish fancy from his heart and mind. That she was in all things as much above him as the heavens are above the earth. But the passion refused to be banished. It remained and grew and tortured him unceasingly.

And now the man who he knew had gained her love was in great peril—perhaps dead. At any rate the chances were, so Socorro affirmed, that if not already dead he would be slain ultimately if not rescued.

A flush of shame flamed across the crimson blotch as he realized where these heated thoughts were leading him. Tom Nolan had a noble spirit, if little else; and casting behind him the hideous suggestions that had apparently come unbidden, he allowed the nobility of his character to struggle to the front.

"It's certain Jake can't go," he said, speaking for the first time. "And from what you say, Socorro, it's equally certain these other men can't be trusted. If you'll let me, I'll accompany you.

"I'll do the best I can; and if I can't help you much, I'll try not to hinder you."

"'Nough said!" exclaimed Socorro, extending his hand. "You ain't over an' above stout, but stren'th ain't ever'thing, as I've had reason to know. If I jist had a few more!"

"I don't think we'll need them! From what you say I take it that we can only hope to succeed by strategy. Two will be better at that sort of work than a dozen."

"K'rect ag'in!" declared Socorro, bobbing his head and pulling ecstatically at his brigandish mustache. "I'm plumb tuckered out, though,

an' I'll have to have a little rest, I'mafeared 'fore I'll be fit fer much trailin'.

"If you say you'll go, though, I'll jist bunk down fer about a hour in any place ye kin put me, an' while I'm snoozin' you kin get things ready. We'll want some grub an' some water-bottles. Hosses, too, till we git to where we'll want to huff it. So you'd better git some one to go with us that fur, to bring 'em back, an' so keep the agents frum gittin' 'em. That's all!"

He yawned and stretched himself in anticipation of the much-craved rest, and was shown at once by Kitty to a little bedroom, where he could "snooze" to his heart's content.

Two hours later Socorro and Tom were in their saddles, with all things in readiness. No one save the Nolans had been informed of Karl's capture, and what report the recreants sent out by the town marshal had given, Socorro cared not to inquire.

Tom Nolan had got an acquaintance to go with them to the point where the horses were to be abandoned.

This point was a considerable distance from the glade where the outlaws had been twice seen by Socorro. The shrewd trailer realized how extremely hazardous it would be to approach that place without taking extra precautions. He had no notion of being led into another trap, nor even of permitting them to suspect he was once more in the vicinity.

They dismounted in a tree-screened valley, instructing the man to return to Leadville by another route. Then, Socorro taking the lead, they plunged into the undergrowth, which was nowhere very heavy, and began to make their way very cautiously toward the glade.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE MASKED CAPTAIN.

KNOWING that to resist would bring instant death, Karl, when grasped by his pursuers, refrained from any useless struggles, but, rising to his feet, stood with folded arms and a smile on his lips.

The bitterness which the smile held changed to keen delight when he saw that Socorro had gained his horse, and was almost certain to make his escape.

"Hold out your hands!" growled Velpau, coming forward with a rope.

The detective did as commanded, and was bound so that escape was well nigh impossible. From the first his keen and active mind had been calculating the chances, and saw they were few.

Nevertheless he did not think the road-agents meant to kill him, whatever they might conclude to do later, and this belief gave him hope.

The major portion of the band engaged in the pursuit of Socorro. The few that lagged under Velpau with the prisoner brought out the remaining horses. After waiting awhile and seeing that the pursuit would be long and probably result in nothing, they mounted and with the detective in their midst started across the country, seeking the rockiest of paths and using every effort to leave behind them a blind trail.

In this they were so successful that Kansas Karl, understanding thoroughly what they were attempting, greatly feared it would be utterly impossible for any one to follow them. He had great confidence in Socorro's ability, but the keenest tracker could not, he felt, follow a path that was apparently as invisible as the line left by a bird in its flight.

Still he would not borrow unnecessary trouble. He had been in many tight places, and he trusted to the same good fortune that had stood by him before.

The route taken twisted in snaky folds around the hills and bluffs, seeming to lead nowhere and everywhere at the same time. That this was intended to add to the difficulties of the trail he felt sure, and when they stopped at last in a deep gorge just as the sun was sinking behind the mountain range, he believed they had come but a very few miles from the place of starting.

Of just where he was he had a very imperfect idea. Somewhere in the tumbled hills adjacent to Leadville. Of that he was certain and only of that.

The night came down soon after, and at that point the outlaws went into camp. He was lifted from his animal and placed with his back against a large boulder, and a sentinel was stationed over him.

When the supper was ready he was given a portion; and when the rascals prepared for the rest they so much needed, he was told he might do likewise, but that the guard had orders to fire on him if he offered to escape.

It was to the detective a night of pain and suspense. He knew not what the morrow might bring. The road-agents had not treated him unkindly, except in keeping him bound and the thongs drawn so tight they hurt severely. But this he expected.

The pain of his bonds and the torture of anxious thought kept him awake a good portion of the night. As he lay there, vainly endeavoring to fall asleep, he fancied time and again he heard whispers floating to him from Socorro. But closer listening showed the sounds to be only the soothings of the light breeze through the pines that waved their branches at the entrance of this re-reat.

He wondered what had befallen Tom Nolan. Perhaps the robbers had slain him. And this thought brought with it a query concerning the bullion they had taken and a specimen of which he and Socorro had found near the glade. The rascals evidently did not have it with them, now, neither was it in their possession when they made him a prisoner. Very probably they had concealed it somewhere in or near the glade, and would return for it at a more convenient season.

Naturally his reveries hovered much and lovingly around the woman who was to him now the dearest creature in the world. He dreaded the effect on her of the news of his capture, and sincerely trusted that Socorro and his friends would not communicate a hint of it to her as long as it could be avoided.

The discovery of the identity of the Black Sphinx likewise troubled him not a little. It was a startling and painful realization to know that the man he was hunting to a prison or the gallows was the father of the woman he hoped to make his wife, if his life was spared.

As the exposor of her father's villainies and thus the bringer of lasting infamy on the Taggart name and family could he ask her to become his wife? It was a problem fraught with great consequences.

Toward morning he dropped into a troubled doze, and when he came out of it he found that day had dawned and that the outlaws were astir and preparing for the morning meal.

There was a tiny rivulet not far away, and to this the horses were led for water, after which they were picketed on the short grass which grew scantily further up the gorge.

When breakfast was served his hands were unbound and he was allowed to partake as freely as he wished.

An hour later Velpau came and seated himself near the captive and spent considerable time talking on a variety of subjects. Kansas Karl felt that the young man was attempting to sound him and discover who and what he really was; and thinking thus he kept close watch on his utterances.

When Velpau departed, the guard kept up a running fire of comment on extraneous topics, avoiding any reference, however, to the prisoner's condition or proposed fate. This guard was a wary fellow and worthy of his position, for although he talked glibly enough about Leadville and mining, and the mountains and the scenery, he was silent as an oyster whenever the detective approached any subject he did not wish to discuss.

And thus the long day wore away, monotonously and drearily, and filled with a thousand anxieties.

It was very evident to Kansas Karl that the road-agents were awaiting there the coming of some one; but who that some one was he had no idea.

From physical pain the day was comparatively free, for the guard had that morning, at Velpau's order, loosened the cutting cords that had so tortured Kansas Karl throughout the darkness.

Night was again approaching, when a stir in the camp proclaimed that the long-expected individual was drawing near; and, a short time after, the masked captain, who has already been introduced to the reader, rode into the gorge, accompanied by a single attendant.

On dismounting, he came at once to the place where Karl was sitting.

"You've caught the fox!" he declared, addressing the young lieutenant. "Yes, sir; you haven't made any mistake this time!"

With eyes and ears sharpened by recent disclosures, the detective scanned every movement and listened to every accent.

"It's the same," he muttered, under his breath.

"The voice is disguised by a totally different twist of words and syllables and the walk is also assumed. But this captain of the road-agents is the Black Sphinx, and the Black Sphinx is—Taggart!"

"What are you muttering and mumbling about, sirrah?" the latter demanded, noticing the almost imperceptible movement of the prisoner's lips.

"I was just thinking I would like to see behind that mask for one instant."

"Little good it would do you. You wouldn't get a chance to make your discovery available for use, for I needn't tell you, I suppose, that when you leave our hands you won't be good for much of anything, except to feed the carrion crows. My worthy lieutenant, on capturing you, sent for me to come down and inspect the quality of the game, as he had an idea you were a little more than the ordinary fry that comes against us."

"And so you are! For I know you, Kansas Karl, and know that you've been sent into these mountains to endeavor to break up our organization. It's been tried before by as able men as you, and they have always failed. And you have failed."

"I don't care to spend words with you. If you have any prayers to say you may spend what little time you have left in saying them. And I warn you that the time will be short!"

Then he walked away, and Kansas Karl, sitting in the shadow of death, heeded not the other shadows that the night was casting about him.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"BLOOD IS THICKER THAN WATER."

For a half-hour the masked captain stood near the mouth of the gorge engaged in earnest conversation with Velpeau. Then the lieutenant shouted a command, and a detail of six armed bandits came into the light of the camp-fire that had been kindled near the concealing wall of a rocky pocket; and the detective felt that his time on earth was indeed short.

These armed murderers were on the point of advancing toward the prisoner, when a sudden alarm arose among the horses, and the entire band came tearing wildly down upon the camp. It was evident some one had got into their midst and released them, and was endeavoring to run them off by a wild stampede.

Naturally the greatest excitement ensued among the road-agents; and temporarily losing their heads, they ran excitedly hither and thither, some trying to stop the scared animals and others rushing up the gorge to see what had caused the commotion.

In this skurry, Karl was momentarily forgotten. Then a form not readily distinguishable from one of the road-agents hurried to his side, and a familiar voice whispered:

"All right, are you? Hold out your hands so I can get at the ropes!"

It was the voice of Tom Nolan! and never did tones of lovely woman sound sweeter than those words.

Surprised as he was, the detective instantly comprehended and obeyed.

"Now cut from the place!" Tom ordered. "Socorro stampeded the horses, and will be waiting for us just outside the mouth of the gorge. We climbed in here over the cliffs after darkness set in. Come! I haven't time to explain more."

He darted away, scarcely looking back to see that Kennedy followed.

The detective saw him flitting toward the mouth of the gorge; and before he could get to his feet and obtain the proper use of his limbs, Nolan's form could not be told from that of one of the outlaws.

"At the mouth of the gorge!" exclaimed the detective. "I ought to be able to reach it during all this confusion. Nolan seems to be making it all right, and I suppose I can't do better than follow his bold example."

Thus thinking, he hastened off in the same direction, and, five minutes later, was hailed in low tones by Socorro Sam.

"Made it, did ye? But, where's the boy?"

"He ought to be here by now," Kansas Karl made answer. "He started off in advance of me."

But though they waited and waited Tom Nolan did not come.

Socorro and Tom had had a hard time in reaching the gorge where the road-agents lay in concealment awaiting the coming of their captain. And had it not been for that same coming, they could not have found it at all. The trail of the horses on the flinty soil was so very faint that even Socorro with all his skill in that kind of work, could not follow it.

Nevertheless, they had continued the attempt, literally feeling out the way, and then half of the time almost sure they were going wrong.

But with the appearance of the captain and the man who accompanied him all this changed. They knew he was a member of the band they were hunting by the black mask he wore. They saw him from an elevation without themselves being seen, and when he passed, Socorro took up the trail of the two horses, which was as plain as a wagon road compared with the one they had been trying to decipher.

When the captain passed through the mouth of the gorge and was hailed by the sentinel stationed there, they knew they had found the band's secret haunt.

They could not follow him through there and behind those rocky walls in that way, however; and the scout set his wits to work to devise some other plan of gaining ingress.

On leaving the horses with the man who was to take them back to the camp, they had retained possession of the ropes which had been attached to the saddle-bows; and these stood them in good stead in this critical emergency.

Socorro added to his other accomplishments that of a good climber, and he quickly set about scaling the almost impassable wall that inclosed the gorge on that side. When, with the aid of the rope he had reached the top and made certain the outlaws were surely camped within, he outlined a plan of action and climbed back to where he had left Tom in waiting.

The plan was very simple; and, as has been seen, very successful.

Carrying it out, he assisted his companion to mount the wall after him; and then both let themselves down upon the inside. And while the scout hastened down to loose and stampede the horses, Tom, amid the consequent confusion, released the prisoner.

So far the plan worked like a charm.

Then came a break in the chain of good luck. Tom Nolan, in attempting to make his way out of the mouth of the gorge, was noticed and hailed by one of the road-agents, who had approached quite near to him without being perceived.

At this Tom started to run, and the outlaw, shouting to some who were still nearer the entrance, the brave boy who had risked so much in behalf of the detective was captured just when it seemed certain he must escape.

While this was taking place, or soon after, confusion yet reigning supreme, Karl passed over almost the same route and escaped without detection.

Thus does the battledore of chance or fortune toss one man up and another down.

The angry men gathered about Tom, and, reckless of his life or limbs, dragged him before the fire, where they cast him down as if he were only so much inanimate matter. And there he lay, as Velpeau hurried up in answer to their calls, his clothing half torn from him, and his arms and shoulders bleeding from the rough handling.

"Leave him to me," said the young lieutenant, sternly. "And some of you hurry to where that rascally detective was left. I begin to see through this trick. There has been a preconcerted attempt to rescue him, and the stampede was only a blind. The rest of you look out sharply and make a search of the gorge. There may be more like this fellow hidden in here."

He gave these orders in a quick, sharp way, and when the men had hastened off to do his bidding, he turned to Tom, who had not ventured to lift himself from his prostrate position.

As he did so, Velpeau started and gave a little cry.

"You live over in the town there?" he asked, while Tom wondered what the cry meant.

"Yes," said Tom.

"Ah! I thought so! And your name is Tom Nolan. I've seen you before, though it's not likely you've ever seen me."

Nolan confessed that he had not.

"I was sure you hadn't, for I don't go round much where it might not be healthy for me to get caught!"

He looked about, and seeing that no one was in sight, stooped over the fallen boy.

"I'd like to say something to you, but I guess I'd better not. Remember, though, that my name is Velpeau, for I don't want you to forget me; and that blood is thicker than water. Hence I give you your liberty! I'll explain to those fellows when they come back that you managed in some way to give me the slip."

He was actually cutting the light cord with which Tom's hands had been bound by the men who had taken him.

"Now come!" he whispered. "I'll show you a way out of here. Be quick, or some of the scamps may come back, and then it will be too late!"

Tom Nolan could not understand it at all, but he needed no second bidding; and crouching low, he followed his strange guide, who led him to a near angle of the wall. Here grew a mass of vines; and Velpeau, drawing them aside, pointed to the opening thus revealed.

"That will lead you to the outside. Go! Go!"

And Tom darted into the gloomy place.

The next instant he heard Velpeau's voice raised in alarm, telling to the outlaws that their new prisoner had slipped through his fingers.

CHAPTER XXV.

A NIGHT RETREAT.

THE leafy screen had dropped into place, and as Tom hurried on, the increasing distance and the windings of the narrow passage shut out the sounds in the gorge. When he had traversed a distance of perhaps fifty yards through this natural tunnel he came to a rock which seemed to bar further progress. But, feeling about it with his hands, he found a small opening just beneath, about large enough to admit of the passage of a man's body, and through this he crawled, finding himself in the free, outer air, and so dazed by this sudden turn of events that he scarcely knew what to do or which way to turn.

The stars were shining overhead and low clouds scudded occasionally by, obscuring their light. By them, however, he was able to locate the points of the compass, and when sure of the direction, he laid out a course which he believed would bring him to the mouth of the gorge.

As this was the agreed place of meeting he thought it possible that Sam and Karl were still there awaiting his coming, and no doubt wondering at his long delay.

The route was very rocky and in making his way over it he stumbled and fell frequently. Once he dislodged some pebbles, and stopped with his heart almost in his mouth, feeling sure the sound must have been heard by the outlaws. But hearing nothing to indicate that it had been, he continued on, and in a little while gained the point opposite the entrance where he hoped to find his friends.

They were not there. He could hear a subdued murmur from beyond the angle of wall telling him the road-agents were making an excited and eager search of the interior and that they were coming toward him.

Knowing it would be perilous to remain longer in the vicinity and still not wishing to leave the place until he had learned something of the fate of Karl and Socorro, he began to call the latter's name in low, quick tones.

To his joy he was answered from the bluff above his head; and, a moment later, Sam slid down a rope and was at his side.

"Thought as how you must 'a' been ketched, seein' you stayed so long!" the scout whispered. "Come this way! Our friend's over hyer."

He took Tom Nolan by the hand, and hurried with him from the place just as the sound of voices showed the road-agents were extending their search to the outside.

Tom did not have time to explain anything or to speak of his adventures. But, when they had gained the point where the detective lay in waiting, and Socorro announced that they would remain a little while and see what the "skunks" intended to do, he unbosomed himself to both and gave the full particulars of his capture and release.

It was a strange narrative, and called forth no inconsiderable amount of comment.

"They're a-spreadin' out," Socorro announced at this juncture. "I 'low we'd better make ourselves scarce in this vicinity. They mou't stumble ag'in' us, the way the'r thrashin' aroun'! Makes me think o' a lot of bees buzzin' over a field of buckwheat."

It required no very keen ear to attest the fact that the outlaws were constantly drawing nearer; and the trio beat a hurried but quiet retreat.

"It's no use remaining here," said Kansas Karl, when they had put a sufficient distance between themselves and their foes to make talking safe. "We can't hope to accomplish anything. You have succeeded in your mission, and I owe my life to you. Why not go on toward the camp as fast as we can?"

"I don't know as you owe yer life to anybody," growled Socorro, who never wished to be praised for doing only what he considered his duty. "I led ye into the trap, an' I'd been a purty kind o' chap if I hadn't tried to git ye out ag'in'! If you owe anything it's to Tom there. He's the feller what cut yer ropes!"

"As to 'other, hows'ever, I'm agreed. The p'int is, which way shall we go?"

"Toward the town!" Tom ventured, anxious to assist the conversation into this new channel.

"An' be gobbled, likely! Better make a circus of it, an' strike for the upper pass. They'll lay for us along the straight one, shore, if they onc't get ahead."

The others readily acceded to the proposition, for in matters of this sort they considered Socorro an undisputed authority.

It was a long and circuitous route to the upper pass, and the faint starlight so dimly illuminated the way that they were in constant danger of pitching into chasms or breaking their necks in tumbling over boulders.

They gained it at last, however, thoroughly fagged. Tom, who was not very strong at the best, was so completely exhausted that they had to choose between carrying him or halting until he could somewhat recruit.

They chose the latter, and for almost an hour lay in the shadows of some pines, discussing the events of the night and outlining plans for the future.

This delay, necessary as it seems, came near proving fatal. As they advanced up the pass, after having become thoroughly rested, they were greeted by a volley of rifle-bullets, fired at short range. The outlaw captain, suspecting they might take this route, had sent a small force to guard the pass, with orders to shoot the men down without quarter, should they come that way.

"Run fer it! This way!" whispered Socorro, glancing about and seeing that neither of his companions had fallen under that apparently deadly fire. "Don't stand still an' let 'em git another whack at ye!"

He darted to the cover of the piled boulders at the side of the trail, and the others following close at his heels, had hardly gained this insecure shelter when another volley sent the balls screaming in dangerous proximity.

Then amid the confusion caused by the ineffectiveness of the fire and their quick movements, and while the voice of the outlaw leader was shouting wildly and indistinctly, they bent low at Socorro's orders and hurried into a side passage which opened at that point.

"Stand hyer!" whispered the scout, when they had run but a few yards, and he drew them behind a large rock. "They'll naturally think we've run on."

It seemed almost a foolish thing to do, but events showed that Socorro was right in his surmise.

Panting with rage and vexation, the road-agents hastened into the side passage at the top of their speed, and streamed by without giving a glance at the rock behind which the men they sought were lowly crouching.

No sooner had they gone by than Socorro led the way back to the pass.

"They may have left some one to watch fer us hyer," he whispered, "but we'll haf to resk that. We can't stay hyer any longer fer them fellers 'll come b'iliz' back d'reckly."

They saw the outlines of some horse in the gloom, but no one was in the pass to bar the way; and, jubilant over the escape they had so easily made from what seemed almost certain death, they ran forward until Socorro ordered another halt.

"We'd better climb among the rocks ag'in," he said. "They'll be apt to foller us with the hosses as soon as they find we ain't in that side pocket, an' it'd be awk'ard to have 'em run up onto us sudden like."

The wisdom of this was apparent, when a few minutes later a band of the renegades galloped furiously along the trail 'hey had been following.

When they had passed, Socorro advised another cautious advance. This was followed by a second hiding among the rocks. Then other advances and concealments alternated as the exigencies of the flight seemed to demand.

An hour before dawn they were clear of the dangerous pass and free to seek out any side path they chose, and at the coming of the sweet and long-hoped-for light of day, they entered Leadville. The rescue o' Kansas Karl had been effected, and he and his rescuers had baffled the best laid plans of the pursuers!

CHAPTER XXVI.

SMOOTHER CHANNELS.

AFTER reaching the town they debated for a time whether they should again lead a party after the thieves or not. Karl and

Socorro visited the Sexton Brothers and revealed to them all they had learned. So convincing were the proofs and arguments which they were able to present that the final result of the interview was the restoration of Tom Nolan to the confidence and pay of the firm, with every suspicion against his integrity and honor cleared away.

The immediate effect of the interview was the organization of another band to take up the search for the secret stronghold of the road-agents, and especially to hunt for the bullion which they had carried away and evidently hidden near the glade.

This last effort was attended with some success, though the first was altogether fruitless. Under the masterly guidance of Socorro the glade was visited, and after many hours of careful search some of the buried bullion was located and restored to its owners. It had not all been deposited in one place, however, and the remainder could not be found.

Kansas Karl, while these efforts were being put forth, felt almost criminally guilty in that he did not boldly denounce Taggart to the authorities as the head of the road-agent band and have him placed under arrest. Time and again he worked himself to the point of so doing; then Tressie's pale and pleading face interposed, and he put the thought from him.

He would be forced to do it sooner or later, he told himself, but he felt he could not take that step yet. And besides, catching the chief might not destroy the band, if all the other members escaped, and he would wait until he had them also in a manner in the toils. Thus he cheated himself into believing he was following the path of prudence, and so staved off for a time the inevitable exposure.

Since the visit to his office and rooms of Madame Marsden, when he had by an artful trick been placed in so false a light before Tressie, he had not seen the madame.

Thinking over all that had been said at the various interviews he had had with her, and sifting as closely as he could the memory of her manner, actions and words, he came to the conclusion that if there was one person in Leadville more than another he ought to watch, that one was Madame Marsden.

Hence it came about that while he had but recently endeavored to shun her society, he now sought it with a persistence and eagerness that greatly pleased and flattered the painted beauty.

As usual she had any amount of small errands for him to attend to. In this respect she seemed never at a loss; and he, with his wits aroused and exercised along this new line, was only too glad of the excuse they gave him to be much with her.

And thus the days wore away, and a thousand little things, little in themselves but making a grand total, were observed and noted, all tending to show that the madame was playing a shrewd and deep game.

One evening, as he called at her apartments unbidden, he saw a slim, dark young man make a hasty exit at the rear door as he came in at the front. It was only a glimpse he caught, but it was sufficient to show that the young man was Philip Velpeau, the lieutenant of the road-agents.

The madame greeted the detective with face wreathed in the sweetest of smiles, all unaware of what he had observed; and although he gave her abundant opportunity in the course of the conversation to mention the previous caller she did nothing of the kind.

"The madame is as wise and wary as a fox," he soliloquized, as he made his way homeward. "And how she has taken me in! I'll have to confess that I'm not half so smart as I've been given the credit of being. There can be no question, now, that she is in the confidence and employ of Taggart, and has been watching me all the time for his especial benefit and the protection of the band. It's a great scheme! A long-headed scheme, and has been worked to perfection. But, my dear madame, you can't pull the wool over my eyes any more!"

Thinking thus he made his way to the boarding-house where Socorro Sam was generally found when not at work and not at the saloons. He was pleasantly surprised to find Sam in his room. It was a very unusual occurrence.

"I thought I'd come up and chat a little,"

the detective observed, as Socorro bade him welcome.

Then he gradually edged to the subject on which he wished to speak, and told the ex-scout who and what he really was and the causes that had led him to visit the place.

"Some sich idees as that had already slipped up under my sculp!" Sam averred, with a broad grin and a tug at his mustache. "I hadn't figgered ever'thing out so clost as what you've told me, but I knewed you was shore layin' fer somebody."

He was surprised, though, at what Kansas Karl had to say of Taggart. He had acted as the detective's second on the night of the duel, as will be remembered, but had never dreamed that the face of the rich mine-owner was concealed behind that black silk half-mask.

Concerning the madame he had something to communicate on his part. It was what he had observed the night he got into the fight with the Mexican gambler over a game of cards at the General's Tent. He had suspected the madame from that moment; and when he discovered that the Dutch saloon-keeper was acting as fence for thieves, he felt he had found the true explanation of the cause of the madame's sudden appearance on that occasion.

"I've all along suspected the General," said the detective, carefully weighing the communications made by Socorro. "I knew he wasn't doing a straight business, but I really had no idea the madame was acting as the agent of the robbers, till I caught Velpeau sneaking out of the back way to-night. You're correct, however, in all you say. It's very plain to me, now!"

"And, by the way, that Velpeau is a sharp one! He visits this town frequently, I've no doubt. Perhaps every time the road-agents make a raid on a stage; and yet this is the first time I've seen him in the camp. He slips about at night, I surmise, imitating the sly characteristics of the weasel."

"I saw two of the members of the gang in town to-day, too; though, as I was d'ing a little masquerading in search of information, they didn't recognize me, and talked quite freely and glibly in my presence."

"Why didn't you 'rest the villains?" Socorro demanded.

"Why, my dear Socorro, it would be worse than useless! It would cause the larger fish to take the alarm and probably break through the net. I hope to haul them all in one of these fine days; and if my plans don't go awry I'll do it too, to the astonishment of some men I know in this town."

"Good!" cried the ex-scout, slapping his knee. "I want to be at that funeral, you hear me! There's a purty gal not a thousand miles away 'at'd cry her eyes out, though, I'm thinkin', if you haul in Taggart!"

Kansas Karl flushed and shifted uneasily under his friend's keen glance, and hastened to change the drift of the conversation.

"Hit hard!" thought Socorro. "Well, all I can say is, she's a han'some creeter, an' I wishes him luck. Though how he's to fish Taggart in, feelin' that way, knocks me!"

The detective now led the talk to the prospects and conditions of the Nolans. Tom had been restored to his position as night-watch; and Socorro had secured a place for Jasper at the mine where he was himself employed. Thus, with them, all things appeared to be going well.

The labor troubles seemed to have quieted without any desperate measures having been undertaken by the disaffected workmen; and all things apparently boded a continuous reign of peace and order.

These subjects and many other's having little connection with the events of this story were discussed at considerable length by the detective and his confidant. And at the close of the long talk, when Kansas Karl arose to take his leave, he made Socorro an offer:

"I need a good man like you, Socorro. You could assist me in many ways. I should not require you all the time; but I'd be glad to feel free to call on you for help whenever the occasion demanded. I'll pay you well, too, for whatever you may do!"

"Done!" cried the latter, extending his hand. "I ain't a-keerin' about the pay, but I'll be glad to be with you in any under-

takin' that looks toward layin' these skunks out!"

Thus the compact between these men of strongly opposite characters was confirmed; and when Kansas Karl took his departure he felt he had accomplished a good night's work.

He did not see, however, the shadowy figure of Philip Velpeau, crouching in an angle of the corridor as he retreated—the position showing that Velpeau had followed him from the madame's and had overheard every word that had been uttered by the two men during the evening.

CHAPTER XXVII.

HOODWINKING THE "GENERAL."

THE stories told by Socorro concerning the General—for he had also informed the detective of the discovery of the watches and jewelry—made the latter anxious to learn just how much the Dutch thief knew of the road-agents and of the connection which the madame and Taggart had with them.

Hence, on the following night he disguised himself in coarse attire and paid a visit to Schermann's establishment.

The usual crowd of rough and boisterous characters was there. It was late, however, and they were beginning to leave in groups of twos and threes.

The detective in his disarming miner's dress attracted no attention and for some time strolled leisurely about, listening with seeming carelessness to the talk of the shaggy-bearded men. Once or twice he fell into an apparently casual conversation with one or more of these, and passed without difficulty the ordeal of their questions and scrutiny.

As the last turned to go, and the General seemed on the point of putting up the shutters for the night, Karl advanced and handed the latter a letter. It purported to be from Philip Velpeau.

In inditing it he had boldly assumed several things, not the least of which was the general ignorance of the German. Should he be acquainted with Velpeau's handwriting the game would be immediately blocked.

"What vhas dhoes?" Schermann questioned, staring owlishly at the bit of paper. "I vhas nod been mooch on dhis Inklish wriddings! Now, uff id vhas Cherman!"

"It's a letter from Velpeau!" said the detective stepping quickly to his side, and whispering the words impressively. "Allow me to read it to you."

Schermann fell back and looked hard at him.

"Phelbeau! Dhis vhas a square peesness, eh?"

"Why! What do you mean? Of course it's a square business! You can soon see what it is, if you'll let me read it!"

He was glancing sidewise at the writing.

"Vhell, go ahead!" Schermann growled.

And this is what Kansas Karl read:

"MY DEAR GENERAL:—This will introduce to you one of the gang—Joe Deeson by name. You will find him all right. I want to know if you can handle the bullion we got from the Sextons? Arrangements will have to be made for recasting it, to get rid of the stamp. Send word by Mr. Deeson of what you can do."

"Yours,

VELPEAU."

A troubled light came into the German's face as he listened to the reading, and the expression was not lost on Kennedy, who, repeating the contents of the writing from memory, was watching him as the eagle watches its quarry.

"You didn't expect to get word in this way?" he questioned, making a shrewd guess at the German's thoughts.

He believed the worst difficulty had been passed, for his great fear had been that the bullion had been already placed in the hands of the "fence."

"Naw!" said the General, tugging at his long-stemmed pipe.

"Velpeau said you'd look to hear from the business through Madame Marsden, but that he couldn't very well get to see her, now, and that this would do as well."

Schermann's face cleared somewhat.

"He said dot?"

"As near as I can remember; yes! Set us out some schooners of beer and we'll talk the thing over at leisure."

He understood the national weakness, and

threw out this gentle bribe for the German's good will.

Schermann laid the pipe across the table standing near and toddled away for the beer, soon returning with the foaming beverage on a sloppy and dirty waiter.

Karl took one glass and shoved the other to the General.

"It's my treat. Help yourself. I can't talk well unless I've something to wet my whistle as I go along."

"Me doo!" and a broad smile overspread the phlegmatic face.

"You understand we haven't all the bullion we got that haul, for a part of it was recovered by some men sent out from here. But we've got enough, yet, to make it interesting. I suppose I can tell the lieutenant that you'll take it?"

The German seemed to be still fighting shy of committing himself, but as he sipped his favorite drink his caution and reserve began to vanish; and he was soon talking glibly enough.

"Perhaps it would be better for me to suggest to Velpeau that you'd rather make the bargain with the madame, as you've been accustomed to doing. It might be more satisfactory all around. But Velpeau seemed very anxious to know what could be done with the stuff, and so sent me up."

"I'll dake it, you may pe zhure, uff dher-cend is peeg enough to make me mine brofis. Id vhas a risk hantling dhoes dhings for dho poys, you pet me, und I hafe to hafe bay in brobortion, you understand?"

"Certainly! That's right! You can't be expected to do such work for nothing. Yes I allow the madame would be the right one, after all. She's a wonderful woman, the madame! I've often thought what a blow it would be to the band, if she should leave them."

"You pet!" and Schermann, with his nose in the depths of the schooner, solemnly nodded his head. "Id vould puddy near lay dhem out, I tol you vhor shure."

"Seems to me, though, that the captain is the one who, by rights, ought to look after such things. Hasn't it struck you that way? Why does he leave that part of the work to a woman?"

"You gid me!" the general confessed. "Dhot captain vhas a queer vhus."

"Now, Velpeau leads in all the fighting and raids, and the madame looks out for the sale of the goods. Blamed if I believe the ole man does his sheer of the work!"

"Bud he has a great heat vhor locading!" Schermann vowed. "Vherefer dhere vhas money he knows about id. Dhot vhas something you musd reecolecdt."

"Yes," the pretended Joe Deeson was obliged to confess, "that's a big thing! But has it ever struck you, General, as being thundering queer that none of the boys knows anything about the captain? Who is he, anyhow? I'm plagued if I wouldn't like to know!"

"You gid aheat uff me dhere! Nopoty knows, I dhinks. He vhas shoost dho man uff dho mask! Somedimes I hafe a idea dhot he vhas dhoes wheliers what dhey calls dho Plack Svinx."

"Now do you know, General, blast my buttons! but I've thought the same thing!" with an air of keen delight. "You've got a head on your shoulders, as sure as you live! And yet there's not a man, besides we two, in this town, that ever dreams of such a thing! And, now, the question comes up: who in thunder is the Black Sphinx?"

To this the German was obliged to confess entire ignorance.

"Have another glass of lager! Mebbe that'll clear your wits."

And when Schermann had departed with the schooners and waiter, the detective revolved the question of whether he should suggest the name of Taggart. It was plain the General knew nothing of the mine-owner's masquerading.

"How do you stand on the question of a strike?" he asked, when Schermann had potted back with the beer. "Do you favor the men or the bosses?"

"Dhe workingmens efery dime!" the General declared, jamming his schooner against the table with great enthusiasm.

"Correct you are!" Deeson assented. "Your head's always level. It's just what I've been a-saying, though some of the boys

don't agree with me. Taggart, though, is a first-rate feller, even if he does belong to the upper tens!"

"I hafe nod mooch use vhor dhoes kints of shendlmens!" Schermann asserted. "Ach, dhey vhas no goot!"

"And you don't go anything on Taggart, then?"

"Nodhings!"

There was too much sincerity in the way the exclamation was rolled out to leave a doubt in the mind of the detective on that point. The General, like the members of the road-agent band, had no idea that Taggart was actually the head of the organization.

More glasses of beer were ordered for the General from time to time, and the talk grew, in consequence, very fraternal and familiar. Kansas Karl endeavored to learn if Schermann knew anything about the madame before her appearance in Leadville, and found that he did not.

Then, as the hour was growing very late, he bade the General good-night, with great effusiveness, and took his departure.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AN AROUSED TIGRESS.

His footsteps had scarcely died away when Madame Marsden entered the room, white with wrath.

She had arrived just a few minutes previous, and in time to hear something of the confidential talk of Schermann and the pretended Joe Deeson.

Schermann was still sitting at the table, sipping at his last schooner of beer, and ruminating in his dull way over what had been said. So light were her footsteps he did not hear her when she came in.

"You old Dutch fool!" she screamed, grasping him by the hair and pulling him from the chair to the floor. "Do you know what you've done? I've a good notion to murder you right here. You idiot! You—You bloated beer-keg! You—"

Her voice failed her, so choked was she by angry emotions.

"Led ub! led ub!" pleaded Schermann.

Her rage seemed to give her the strength of two men, and she was dragging him mercilessly over the floor.

"Mine gootness cracious me! Vhas you pe some escaped lunatics dhot you hafe no more senses? Qvit dhot, I dells you! Qvit dhot!"

"Oh, you precious scoundrel. You didn't think I was coming to-night, eh? And so you let this detective in here and tell him everything you know! Do you know what the band will do to you?"

Schermann could hardly speak; but his terror and astonishment, caused by her exclamations and questions, passed all bounds, and he snorted and gurgled in his excess of fright like a drowning man.

"Answer me!" she cried, giving a push that sent him sprawling. "You compound of fat and villainy! Answer me. What did you mean by doing that? Did you think you could reveal our secrets and escape? You should know us better by this time!"

"So hellup me!" he gasped. "So hellup me, I vhas sbeaking only to a mans dhot. Vhas send here py Misdir Phelbeau!"

"Oh you were, eh? It's strange that Mr. Velpeau should send a detective to transact business for him!"

Again the fat German caught his breath, and seemed on the point of expiring.

"Do you mean to tell me, Joe Schermann, that you allowed this man to deceive you into thinking he had come from Velpeau?"

"So hel—"

"Quit protesting," she interrupted, "and answer my questions!"

"Dhot mans say he vhas vrhom Misdir Phelbeau, and dhot he vhas been send apout dhoes dhoes wheliers what dhey calls dho Plack Svinx."

He began hunting frantically in his pockets. The letter could not be found, however, for the very good reason that Kansas Karl had carried it away with him.

The madame had dropped into a chair, and now, to his surprise, began to sob in a hysterical way. This was an action the General could not understand at all.

"I hobe it vhas nod so padt as what you dhink!" he cried, sucking furiously at his unlighted pipe. The action was from force:

of habit, and he did not realize that the stem of the pipe was between his teeth.

"And I took particular pains to warn you against that man!" wailing the words in a disconsolate way. "Oh! oh! We are ruined! we are ruined! For I'm sure you didn't have any better sense than to tell him everything!"

The General set his teeth on the amber mouth-piece, and breathed like an exhausted horse.

"What did you tell him, Schermann? I must know every word. It may not be too late to counteract the effect of your foolish talk. Let me know the worst at once."

She raised herself and looked at him with eyes that burned with the hot fire of fever.

"Id vhas shoost as I tol you a'reaty."

"And he had a letter purporting to be from Velpeau and about the bullion?"

The General nodded.

"And what did it say? He must have taken it off with him!"

"Shoost sayed coult I gid avhay vhid id?"

"And what else?"

The General scratched his aching head to collect his scattered ideas.

"Dhot his name vhas Misder Choe Tee-son!"

Question followed question in rapid succession, the talk and events of the night being thus dragged from him piecemeal.

"It puts us in a terrible strait!" she said, with despairing calmness. "All our secrets in the hands of that man! The result is sure to be our destruction."

Her look changed to one of tigerish ferocity, and she glared at Schermann as if she would like to slay him where he sat.

"Do you know what the band will do to you when they know this?" she hissed.

The German's red face was blanched and his fat form had been shaking like a huge cask of jelly.

"My dear matame! My kint frient! Hafe some mercy on me!" he wailed, rolling to his knees and lifting his hands pleadingly. "Id vhas unindentional! Dot mans make a peeg vholes uff me; und—und I dhink he vhas vrom Misder Fhelbeau! You vhill zay nodhings about id, eh? Dot vhas a goot vhomens!"

She laughed hysterically.

"Get up, you old beer-keg! I've been an idiot for trusting important secrets to you. I suppose you're not to blame for your lack of sense."

Velpeau had not yet had opportunity to communicate to her the discoveries he had made while eavesdropping. Had he done so, she would have known that Schermann told the detective little more than the latter already knew, and she might not have been so hard in her treatment of the terror-stricken "fence."

At her command, the German regained his chair and pipe with a celerity that was marvelous, and then sat staring, and pulling at the cold mouth-piece, with a gravity that would have brought tears of laughter from an on-looker.

Madame Marsden smiled faintly in spite of her perturbation. Then the cloud of anxious thought returned to her brow, and she began turning over hasty plans for outwitting the man who seemed bent on the exposure and ruin of the band.

"There's only one thing we can do!" she declared at length, glancing up with a look of hard and stony determination. "Maybe you've sense enough to guess what that is!"

Schermann nodded a solemn negative.

"We must kill him! Put him out of the way! Do you understand? That's our only chance. If we don't, the Penitentiary will get every one of us!"

Schermann's jelly-like quiverings showed that he comprehended quite as well as the madame the dangers to which he had unwittingly exposed the Cohort.

"How to do it is the question!" her fierce tones again becoming thoughtful. "He's the keenest fellow that's ever been sent against us. But it must be done!"

"You pet!" and the German removed the pipe to give the words greater force. "Dot vholder vhas a villain. Id makes me hod, the vhay he vhoole me."

"You'll learn a lesson from it perhaps!" dryly. "You'll have to let beer alone. You

become entirely too loose-tongued and warm-hearted after you have guzzled that awhile."

A contortion of pain swept across Schermann's face. To give up his favorite beverage would be torture indeed. The threatened horrors of the Penitentiary could scarcely be worse.

"Ach! dhis is awvul!" and he smacked his lips in a regretful way. "Dhot vholder vhas a scoundrel!"

"It's getting late and I must go!" she declared, rising. "Let beer alone, and keep your mouth shut when strangers come around. If you don't you'll not get off so easily next time."

Then she crept stealthily into the street, leaving Schermann sitting bolt upright in his chair, his pipe in his trembling hand and his lips framing maledictions against the man who had so deceived him.

CHAPTER XXIX.

LOVE VS. DUTY.

WELL satisfied with the manner in which he had succeeded in hoodwinking the General, Karl took his way slowly homeward after leaving "the Tent." His suspicions were fully confirmed, but their certain confirmation thrust forward with unpleasant prominence a duty that he shrunk from and wished secretly to avoid. And so strong was his antipathy on this point that he proceeded to beat up a dust-cloud of specious pleadings and false logic, and befoog his mind into thinking it desired only the path that promised the best results, when in truth it wanted to follow the line least painful. We have all done this at different periods of our lives.

The evidence he had accumulated left no doubt that Taggart was guilty of many crimes. He was the man the detective had come there in search of. And the latter, knowing his haunts and habits, could at almost any moment place him under arrest. Yet he hesitated, fearing the effect of such an act on Tressie.

"Taggart is the big fish," he argued, "but I'll rake in the whole school, if I work the nets just right. It will be a great thing, sure, if I succeed in taking the ertire band. It will make a number of men I know open their eyes a little."

In all his cogitations Tressie naturally occupied a large portion of his thoughts. She had become a part of his life, and he made no movement without thinking how she would regard it. The knowledge that it was her father he was shadowing and plotting against was gall and wormwood. This knowledge shackled and weakened every thought and act. But for it he would have placed Taggart under immediate arrest, with certain of his followers, and forced one of them to guide him and a force of trusty men to the road-agent rendezvous. And thus with one bold stroke he would have endeavored to blot out the robber organization.

On reaching his room he retired at once and endeavored to sleep, hoping his harassed mind would have a clearer grasp of affairs in the morning. But so overwrought were his nerves, and so intense the mental strain to which he had been subjected, that sound and refreshing slumber evaded him, and until the rosy dawn crept in through the window, he tossed upon a restless and sleepless bed.

A good breakfast and an abundance of hot, strong coffee served to knit him into something more than a bundle of sensitive nerve fibers; and he faced the work of the day with a little of his old strength and resolution.

He had reached a conclusion, and this placed a firm foundation beneath his feet. During the night the temptation to abandon the task in which he was engaged had more than once assailed him with almost irresistible force. He was under no obligation, he had told himself, to continue the work on which he had entered. Other men abandon their tasks when they become distasteful; and had he not the right to do the same?

He had fallen in love with Tressie Taggart, and hoped to make her his wife, some day. The arrest of her father, whom she seemed to idolize, would end this sweet dream, for she could not be expected to clasp for life the bloody hand of his slayer. Did duty command him to dash to the ground the chalice of joy which the future seemed to extend? And if it did, was he

bound to obey the iron command? Time and again the answer had come: "No!"

Then the pendulum had swung backward, and through a torturing course of reasoning sought the other extreme, where for a time it rested.

This was ended now. He had taken his reckoning, and amid pangs unutterable chosen his course; and now nothing could shake him. He would proceed with the case he had commenced, let the result be what it might to himself and the woman he loved.

There was one reservation, which, however, he did not consider a reservation, and which has been previously stated: The line of action settled on did not contemplate the immediate arrest of Taggart. That was to be accomplished only when the band had been located and corraled.

"I must find out their hiding-place, and I'll begin the work at once!" he declared. "It's sure to be a difficult job."

The greater part of the day was passed in laying the plans by which he expected to accomplish the ends sought. He remained in his rooms much of the time, and saw no one but the lodgers and inmates of the hotel.

When night returned, however, he again went out into the streets; and until a late hour haunted the Lode Star gaming-rooms for the purpose of watching and studying the movements of the Black Sphinx.

When it seemed the latter did not intend to put in an appearance, Kansas Karl left the place and turned his steps toward the humble lodging-house which Socorro called home.

It was situated in the outskirts, and in an obscure part of the town. As he was proceeding in that direction an excited cry of fire arose. At the same moment he saw a column of flame leap from one of the windows of the lodging-house.

Breaking into a run, he bounded toward the burning building. On reaching it he discovered that the fire had already made such progress that it was beyond control. An excited crowd was gathering, and some feeble attempts were being made to organize a bucket brigade with which to fight the flames.

"Has any one seen Socorro Sam?" he asked, speaking to the first acquaintance he encountered.

Socorro's room was on the second floor, and a suspicion had flashed across the detective's mind that the fire might have something to do with his pard.

No one knew anything about Socorro's whereabouts. In fact the latter was so much of a night-bird, and so erratic in his movements—coming and going at all sorts of irregular hours—that the thought that he might be in the house had entered the mind of no one.

A few quick queries showed that the origin of the fire was wholly unknown, and that it had the appearance of being incendiary.

Karl waited for no more. Bounding through the open door, he made his way to the stairway and endeavored to ascend. It was filled with a whirling cloud of flame and smoke, which it appeared certain death to enter.

"I'm afraid there's been devils' work here," he gasped, as he stood for a moment appalled in the stifling heat.

With quick decision he darted into the nearest bed-chamber, tore the covering from the bed, and hurrying through the corridor leading to the pump at the rear of the house, soaked the articles in the cold flood. Then he tore with frantic haste back to the stairway.

All this had occupied but a few moments of time, so energetically had he worked.

The flames and smoke were still swirling and sweeping down the stairway like banners wind-blown from the abyss of Sheol. Unheeding them, and with a courage that was sublimely heroic, he enveloped himself in the soaked blankets and dashed up the steps.

It was a frightful ordeal. The heat was so stifling that for a moment he thought he must retreat. Then the terrible danger-line was passed.

He had gained the corridor above, and feeling that the air was cooler and that the smoke had cleared away to some extent, he

threw back the smothering folds and hastened toward the door of Socorro's room.

It was locked, but with a mighty kick he broke it from its fastenings and rushed into the room.

He had hoped he might be mistaken. Now his worst fears were confirmed. Socorro was lying bound and insensible on the cot, and a handkerchief which lay at his side exhaling a suspicious odor showed that chloroform was the agent which had robbed him of consciousness and caused him to fall easily into the grasp of his enemies.

Strong as Kennedy was, it required all his strength to raise the helpless man and drag him into the corridor. Then he was confronted by the knowledge that the fire had so gained in the stairway that it was impossible to descend it.

Something must be done and that at once. The corridor extended to the rear of the building, and by dragging Socorro along its length a window was gained overlooking the back yard. The excited crowd of fire-fighters was at the front. To leap down would have been perilous and perhaps fatal.

He was debating whether or not it would be possible to knit the bedclothing together and by that means lower Socorro, when a man chanced to come into the back yard after water.

Instantly the detective's stentorian tones rung out, and the man's notice was gained.

Escape was then made easy. A ladder was brought from the front and hoisted to the window, and down it Kansas Karl climbed with his insensible burden.

He was greeted with a shower of wondering questions and comments. But he paid little heed to them, and only asked that he might be assisted in carrying Sam to the nearest physician.

An abundance of aid was proffered, and the scout was soon in a doctor's office, where efforts were made to revive him. He had not been touched by the fire, thanks to the detective's prompt action, and the physician's skill soon brought him out of the deathlike condition in which he had been found.

Before this had been accomplished, however, the lodging-house, eaten through and through by the furious flames, had fallen inward with a terrific crash, and was a heap of blazing ruins.

Socorro could give no further account of himself than that he had retired early, being pretty well fagged out with a hard day's work, and had soon after fallen asleep. Of the chloroforming and the other events of the night he knew nothing until they were told to him.

When able to walk, Karl took him home with him; and there they sat till nearly dawn discussing what had happened and speculating concerning it.

"They intend to lay for us," the detective declared, in conclusion. "They've found out what we're up to, and are determined to put us out of the way. I suspected something of the kind when I saw those flames leaping from your boarding-house. We'll have to be as watchful as hawks, or our lives will pay the forfeit. And hereafter we must make it a rule to keep close together, so that one can aid the other in case of need."

CHAPTER XXX.

THE CORD OF THE STRANGLER.

HAVING determined to ferret out the secret retreat of the Canyon Cohort before taking any steps to secure Taggart, Karl Kennedy set about the work with his customary vim and energy.

A persistent shadowing of Taggart in his character of the Black Sphinx seemed to promise the speediest results, and this was the line resolved upon.

In the guise of a newly-arrived sporting-man, therefore, the detective visited the Lode Star the following night. A pretended letter of introduction from a well-known Denver sport put him on the best of terms with the barkeeper and the dealers, and gave him free access to the tables and an acquaintanceship with many of the men seated about them.

The Black Sphinx was tardy, as usual, and when he arrived the playing was at its height.

Karl had played considerably throughout the evening, and now withdrew from the games to watch his quarry, feeling that he could do so without attracting suspicion.

He had settled with Socorro that the latter was to shadow Taggart at his office during the day, while he watched him at the Lode Star throughout the night. In this way every movement made by the suspected mine-owner must become known to them, and if at any time he made a visit to the robber organization he could be followed.

The Black Sphinx was not as successful this evening as he was usually, and left the tables at a comparatively early hour.

Kansas Karl disengaged himself from the throng at the same time and prepared to follow.

The suspected man passed through the cook-room and mounted to his apartment, and the detective hurried to the rear of the building for the purpose of dogging his footsteps when he should appear in his character of Taggart.

He was disappointed, however. For ten minutes or more he stood within the shadow of the bluff awaiting Taggart's coming. At the end of that time he grew restless and nervous, and resolved like the prophet of Islam that if the mountain would not come to Mohammed, Mohammed must go to the mountain.

He knew from previous observation the exact location of the hidden door, and approaching it applied to the lock one of the keys he always carried.

To his delight the bolt turned and the door swung open. Only a black cavity seemed to present itself, though, and he almost feared to enter, not knowing what deadly trap might be concealed within. But as no sounds came from the gloomy depths he rallied his courage and stepped through the doorway, drawing the door softly to after him and locking it.

Having been over the ground before, and having an accurate memory of places he had once seen or been in, he advanced with careful footsteps to the stairway leading to the Sphinx's room.

It was possible, of course, that the gambler might have returned to the gaming-rooms; but Kansas Karl had turned this possibility over and over in his mind and arrived at the conclusion that nothing of the kind had occurred.

He had shadowed the Sphinx many times, and that was something he had never known him to do.

And yet he had never known him to remain in his apartment, as it would appear he was then doing.

On gaining the stairway he felt his way up it in the same cautious manner, and soon reached the short and narrow corridor above. It was just here, opening from the landing, that the Sphinx's room was located.

Here the detective stood for a long time, listening at the door of this apartment, and endeavoring to determine if the gambler was within. But not a sound came from it. The laughter and talk from the bar-room, and the whistling of the cook as he busied himself in his little cubbyhole could be plainly heard. That was all.

"He's returned to the tables," Kansas Karl thought. "Should he conclude to leave by the front door I'll lose him for this night."

He could not go on to the gaming-tables by means of the cook-room, because of the cook; and he thus felt forced to turn back by the way he had ascended.

While debating this a creaking noise came to him from the direction in which he had come, causing him considerable uneasiness. He thought at first that the secret door had been opened. But as the sound ceased and was heard no more, he put this idea away and sought for some other cause.

"Well, I'm doing no good here!" he mentally soliloquized. "On the contrary I may be losing precious time. If there's some one in the corridor below I may have a fight to get out."

He drew and softly cocked one of his revolvers; and, striving to pierce the impenetrable gloom, approached the head of the stairway he had so recently mounted.

As he stepped forward he found himself falling through space, and like a flash came the realization that the sound he had heard

had been the creaking of concealed machinery by which the stairway had been detached and lowered.

He had no time for thought, however, for almost instantly he struck the hard floor beneath, the breath being completely knocked out of him by the force of the fall.

Then before he could rise he felt a cord tighten about his neck, all the blood in his body seemed driven in upon his brain, and breath and consciousness seemed simultaneously choked out of him.

What had happened?

The great detective had fallen into one of the deadliest traps ever devised by a fiendish and cunning ingenuity. His disguise had been penetrated, his intentions comprehended, and plans laid to lead him to his death.

While sitting opposite the Sphinx in the gaming-room, the latter knew who he was quite as well as he knew the identity of the individual concealed behind that silken mask; and the Sphinx had left the rooms for the purpose of inducing him to follow and fall into the net that had been prepared.

The constructor and deviser of the deadly snare, however, was none other than the road-agent lieutenant, Philip Velpeau.

Velpeau had in fact been trailing and shadowing Kansas Karl almost constantly since the night in which he overheard the conversation between the detective and Socorro Sam, and had been as persistently racking his brains for means to end the lives of these men whose existence was such a menace.

It was he who had fired the lodging-house after gaining access to Socorro's room and chloroforming that doughty individual. He had failed there by the merest chance. And now he seemed on the point of silencing one who was likely to prove a more dangerous foe than the scout.

The Black Sphinx on gaining his room had not remained there, but had crept slyly back to the gaming-tables, feeling sure Kansas Karl would not again look for him there. There was method in this. He believed that Velpeau, who was even then concealed beneath the stairway, would succeed in his mission; and the presence of the Sphinx in the gaming-room would prove, should suspicion ever squint in his direction, that he at least had had no hand in the killing.

When the detective fell into the space left open by the turning aside and lowering of the stairway, Velpeau sprung forward and dropped over his head the silken and deadly noose of the professional strangler.

The road-agent lieutenant had all his life lived with men of shady reputations and had been trained in all the murderous arts of the trade he had been expected to follow; and on more than one occasion this silken cord wielded by his slender fingers had forced the breath of life from men who stood in his pathway or in the pathway of his friends.

"Aha!" he grated, as he tightened the noose. "I won't have to lose any more sleep in following you, my fine fellow! And when I wipe out that pard of yours, the coast will be clear again."

The detective was writhing and twisting and making frantic attempts to rise, but everything like clear thought had left him and his struggles were almost purely automatic.

Had not relief come his death would have been accomplished in a very few minutes.

The relief came in a manner wholly unexpected. Two miners became involved in a quarrel in the bar-room, blows were given and returned, and weapons drawn. A shot was fired, and the one who fired it leaped backward into the passage leading to the cook's den and fled up the stairway. His antagonist pursued in hot and furious haste, and the excited crowd streamed after.

When the upper corridor was gained pursuer and pursued tumbled headlong into the cavity that yawned for them; and the sounds of their falling coupled with their cries was all that saved many others from sharing their fate.

Philip Velpeau when he heard the noise of bounding footsteps on the stairs leading to that upper room, drew himself up in momentary forgetfulness of the deadly task on which he was intent.

"An alarm has been given!" he whispered, terror-stricken by the thought of capture in

that place and while thus engaged. "I'll have to dig out!"

He drew a knife; resolved to summarily finish the work he had begun, but as he lifted it for the fatal stroke the foremost of the men tumbled through space and alighted close beside him, with a howl that caused Velpau to take to his heels instantly.

Before he had gained the street by the rear door, the pursuer of the first had similarly fallen into the trap laid for the detective; and the astonished and terrified crowd had halted on the landing.

"Strike a match!" bawled a heavy voice; and the owner of the voice proceeding to obey his own injunction a sputtering light quickly illuminated the gloom.

Then orders flew thick and fast; and in less than a minute later a lamp was procured and men were let down into the gruesome hole.

Kansas Karl, in his disguise of a sport, lay in the stupor of apparent death, but the fellows engaged in the late pugilistic encounter were as lively as a pair of crickets, and as noisy as caged tigers.

They were lifted out first. Then careful hands drew up the insensible form of the detective.

The silken cord was still about his throat; but it had become loosened when dropped by Velpau, and no longer with deadly gripe compressed the muscles and delicate organs.

He was at once recognized as the stranger who had been at the gaming-tables that night.

Speculation ran rife as to how he came there in that situation, and what had caused the staircase to give way. There were men there who had seen the deadly cord of the strangler before and recognized its character, but this threw little light on the mystery.

Amid much wondering he was conveyed to the bar-room, where efforts were made to restore him to consciousness, and with such good results that he was soon able to sit up and give an account of himself.

As soon as his eyes opened and he recalled dimly where he was and what had befallen him, he glanced quickly over his clothing and passed his fingers over his face and hair. Then assured that his disguises had not been removed nor his identity discovered, he proceeded to tell the story of his narrow escape, doctoring and coloring it to suit his own ends.

He told that, becoming lost in the passage leading to that portion of the house, he had ascended the stairs and fallen into the pit where he had been found; and that while in the pit he had been attacked by some one who had endeavored to strangle him with the cord found about his neck.

It was a strange story, but one having an air of plausibility; and while many shook their heads in disbelief or muttered to themselves that the man was insane, others accepted it and built extravagant and even absurd theories to account for its mysteries.

As for Kansas Karl, he fully comprehended the nature of the trap from which he had so narrowly escaped; and left the place grateful to the kind Providence that had so wonderfully preserved him, and more than ever convinced of the perils of the mission he had undertaken and of the murderous character of the men he was pursuing.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A POISONED DRAUGHT.

ALTHOUGH he had been rendered half-unconscious by the shock of the fall into the pit prepared for him, Kansas Karl had caught a glimpse of the strangler, and had therefore a pretty accurate idea of who he was.

He knew Velpau, and felt sure the trim murderer who had dashed at him in the gloom was none other. No one but a member of the Canyon Cohort could have any cause for seeking his life.

What had become of the Black Sphinx he did not then know.

Hoping to surprise the madame into some acknowledgment, or failing in that, to obtain a glimpse of Velpau or learn something of his movements, he paid a visit to the madame the next evening.

On a former occasion he had caught a momentary view of the Cohort lieutenant at that place, and it was the only place in town

where he had ever seen him, though others had reported him as making occasional calls on the "General."

The detective had long ere this settled very accurately the business relationship—if such it may be called—existing between the various members of the robber band, and felt that he knew the part each would play in any common enterprise. So, he was certain the madame was fully acquainted with the late dastardly attempt on his life.

He found Madame Marsden arrayed in her customary silks and smiles. If anything, her greeting was even more effusive than on any previous visit.

"I am so glad to see you," she purred, arranging the rustling silks in the most bewitching way as she composed herself in the luxurious depths of her chair. "It's been an age since you last called. What have you done concerning that last business I intrusted to you?"

"Can this woman be a murderer?" thought Karl, as he looked into the handsome, smiling face.

"Ah!" shaking a jeweled finger at him. "I'll warrant you've completely forgotten what it was, even!"

"Almost, but not quite," he confessed, while inwardly admiring her audacious assurance. "There's the trinket."

He gave her the brooch which she had commissioned him to purchase.

"It's a wonder I remember anything!"

"Ah! Why so?" lifting her arching brows.

"You haven't heard, then, of the perils I have been called to pass through?"

He fancied he detected a tremor as she looked at him with well-feigned surprise and curiosity. But if such there were it passed like the flitting shadow of a cloud, and she was again her imperturbable self.

Her manner during the rehearsal of the events of the two preceding nights formed a study worthy of an actress. It was hard to believe that her astonishment and horror were only assumed, and that his accounts were to her only as twice-told tales. Yet to this belief he was driven by his knowledge of the woman and of her connection with the Canyon Cohort.

He wondered even, while talking, if Philip Velpau were not somewhere in waiting and bringing in every word.

"I caught a glimpse of the young man who wished to furnish me with a neck-tie," he declared, still closely studying her face, without, however, seeming so to do. "I'm sure I've seen him somewhere before."

"Is it possible, Mr. Kennedy?"

"It was rather dark in there," laughing.

"But my eyes are excellent, and the fall didn't wholly deprive me of consciousness. I think I'd know him should I see him again."

He hoped by this avowal to surprise her into an inadvertent dropping of her mask, but failed.

"Where have I seen that man?" he queried thoughtfully, twisting at his mustache. "I have it!" slapping his knee and leaning eagerly forward. "It was here! In this very room!"

"Impossible!" she protested, the color coming and going in her cheeks visibly in spite of the concealing rouge.

"No! I can't be mistaken!" he declared. "I have a photographic memory of the places, and this room is a part of the picture which my memory calls up. Yes; he was going through that door; and I only caught a side and back view, with the profile of his face. But I would know him again among a thousand."

The astonishing statement deprived her for the moment of the power of replying.

"Let me see!" and he sunk back into his chair and recommenced the tugging at his mustache, while she stared at him with a sort of fascinated horror. "It occurs to me that I saw that young man at another time and place also, and that I then heard his name. What was it?"

"Mr. Kennedy!" and her voice had an unnatural accent. "I am positive you are mistaken. Or if not, then the attempted murderer must be one of the servants of this house. No other young man has ever had occasion to call on me here!"

"In the language of somebody-or-other: 'Thou dost protest too much!'" he thought,

scanning her with half-closed eyes. "There is no occasion for such a vociferous denial!"

Then aloud:

"Think once more, my dear madame! He was a young man, slim and wiry, with a dark face and black eyes."

"To the best of my recollection, Mr. Kennedy, and my recollection is generally pretty reliable, no such man was ever here; and even if he were it doesn't follow that I would know him."

"Certainly not! Did I insinuate that?"

She saw that she had overstepped herself, and hastened to retrieve the error.

"No; that is—from what you said I gathered some such idea. I think, though, that the person you saw must have been one of the servants. I can't remember that any young man has called on me either on business or for a friendly visit since I have been in Leadville."

"Probably a book-agent!" and he essayed a laugh. "Last night, however, he was in the neck-tie line."

"You are nervous," she said, "and your fancy is liable to conjure up all sorts of phantasies. If you'll take a little wine you will feel better. It's a sovereign specific for the blues, as I can attest—for like most women I have occasional fits of hysteria."

She arose and stepped into the adjoining apartment, and soon after returned with a bottle of wine and some glasses.

"It's the same you sampled when here before," and she held it up that the light might stream through it. "The finest I've ever been able to get in this town."

The production of the wine seemed to him a clever trick to change the course of a conversation that was distasteful if not perilous. Once or twice before she had brought it out when the talk had taken a turn she did not fancy.

"Try it," she urged, filling one of the glasses and pushing it toward him, and then filling one for herself. "You'll find it excellent."

She sipped hers daintily, but Kansas Karl being rather fond of light, foreign wines, drank his without hesitation, or a thought of treachery,

"It must be gathering strength with age," he asserted, a queer thrill passing through him as he placed the glass on the waiter.

"Some of these wines do," and she laughed quietly as she pressed her glass again to her lips. "Will you have some more? You will not find anything like it this side of Denver."

"No, thank you! It flies right to my head."

A vail swam for an instant before his eyes, and a feeling of giddiness came to him.

Then he felt his senses slipping from him, and like a flash came a realization that he had been drugged.

"What did you do to that?" he demanded, attempting to rise, but sinking back again, while the fair sorceress and all things in the room swam in a singing circle. "You foul fiend! You have poisoned me."

She laughed in his face, her laughter resembling the rippling of far-away music.

"It's only another of your singular fancies!" and the words floated to him like the echoes of a voice from another sphere.

"Traitor!" he gurgled, fighting against the hideous nightmare that began to weigh him down. "You shall not triumph in this way. You shall not! You—you—shall not!"

He tried once more to get on his feet, but sunk back, murmuring incoherent protests and denunciations.

CHAPTER XXXII.

AFFAIRS OF THE HEART.

"Kitty, you're an angel!"

Jake Tillotson lifted his round, bullet head from the pillow, and craned his long neck as he endeavored to follow the movements of pretty Kitty Nolan, who had given him a drink "out of the north corner of the well" as she said, and was now retreating with the dipper.

The Yankee still clung to the belief that he was an invalid, though he had little reason for so doing. Had it not been for his desire to be constantly near Kitty and have her perform for him the little services that had grown so dear, he would have been out and at work long before.

"And you are a pretender and a fraud,

Jake Tillotson, I do believe!" and Kitty, as she returned, shot him a roguish and inquisitive glance out of the corner of her eye. "Did I hear you say you wanted soup for supper?"

"Soup? Yes! But I'd a heap ruther have a kiss, Kitty, if 'tis all the same to you."

"But it isn't, and you ought to know it by this time."

"Come hyer an' lemme tell you something," he pleaded, catching her by the sleeve and trying to draw her toward him.

"Well, now, I won't, Smarty! So there, now!" and she gave the detaining hand a stinging blow. "You're determined to worry the life out of me."

"Jist one!"

"I wont! And there comes father; and I'm glad of it, for you'll have to behave yourself while he's in the house."

Jake grinned ruefully, and sunk back with a sigh; and a moment later Jasper and Tom Nolan entered.

There was a look of settled sadness on Tom's face, which was seldom cheery at its best; but he endeavored to cast it off as he began to talk with Kitty and Jake.

"Getting along all right, old fellow?" he queried.

"Kitty says I'm 'possummin' an' that they ain't anything the matter of me," Jake affirmed. "I guess she's nigh about right; an' I laow I'll crawl aout o' hyer to-morrer. What's the news daown taown?"

"The same old six and seven!" replied Jasper, while Tom gave an involuntary sigh. "The bosses an' the miners, the miners an' the bosses! And they pull and haul and pull and haul, and nothing ever comes of it; and nothing ever will!"

So somber was the air of father and son, that Tillotson felt called upon to do something to dissipate the gloom; and when the Nolans went out to supper in the little lean-to, he got up and dressed, surprising Kitty almost out of her wits by appearing at the dining-room door, just as she was on the point of bringing him the soup and delicacies she had prepared.

"I'm all right," he assured her, as she gave a little cry, and came near letting fall the soup tureen. "You was kerrect in yer guessin' 'baout me, I laow. I'm jist a leetle trimly on my pins, but that'll go 'way 'fore mornin'."

Now, Kitty had not meant what she had said, and was in no small degree alarmed at what she considered Jake's imprudence. But the latter, when the meal had been finished and father and son had taken their departure, proceeded to comfort her in quite a characteristic way:

"Do ye know what I've been thinkin', Kitty? I've been thinkin' that if I laid there much longer I'd git so blame, 'tarnal lazy I'd never want to do any work ag'in. And then where'd I ever git the money to build the haouse I've been plannin'?"

"What house?" said Kitty, with innocent surprise, but with something of a flutter at her heart notwithstanding.

"What haouse? Now dew listen!" and Jake raised his hands in feigned disgust. "Jist as if she didn't know, an' wasn't tickled half tew death jist to hear me mention it. What haouse?"

"Yes, sir! What house?"

"Why *our* haouse! Whose else's haouse should I mean? Who else is int'rested in a haouse, I'd like to know? The haouse that yeou an' me air goin' tew live in, one o' these days."

Kitty flushed and retreated as Jake boldly advanced toward her.

"Come," said he, catching her about the waist and drawing her down beside him. "We've talked love an' shilly-shallied 'raound long enough, without ever gittin' right daown an' sayin' when it's goin' tew be an' what it's goin' tew be. I'm beginnin' tew want somethin' comfortin' er. Mightn't have thought 'baout it so much if I hadn't been laid up this-a-way an' come tew know what it is to have a woman potterin' 'raound the room a-makin' things so blame sweet an' home-like that ye can't sleep fer thinkin' of it."

Kitty struggled to release herself, as in duty bound, but Tillotson had a grip that was steel-like for one who had been calling himself an invalid, and her efforts were in vain.

"Oh, do let me go!" she pleaded.

"Naow, yeou don't mean a word of that, Kitty; yeou know ye don't. An' I wouldn't let ye go if ye did. So yeou might as well be sens'ble an' talk it over with me, right hyer an' naow!"

"What kind of a house are you thinking of?" Kitty questioned, mischievously and with a nervous laugh that sounded very sweet to the love-lorn Yankee.

"Well, I dunno exactly, to tell the truth. 'Twon't be a mansion, but it'll be comfortable an' it'll be *our* home. I'm afraid that'll be it's on'y recommend. I hain't never told yeou yit, but I've been layin' up money fer that fer a good while. I'll git the balance, if yeou'll say yeou'll okkupy it with me."

"You know I will, Jake; but father and Tom will have to occupy it with us. They couldn't get along without me, now that they've depended on me so long."

"Correct!" cried the Yankee, giving her a rapturous kiss. "I wouldn't have that part different, if I could. My own father an' brother, if I had sich, couldn't be nearer to me.

"But I say, Kitty—what's the matter with Tom lately? That boy's a-goin' daown hill terrible!"

"And you haven't guessed his secret, Jake?" her tones becoming low and sorrowful.

"Secret?" and Tillotson stared his amazement. Wrapped in his own dreams of delight, he had not thought that poor Tom Nolan might possess a secret unshared by him.

"Yes," said Kitty, very gently. "Tom is bearing about with him a secret that is slowly carrying him to the grave. It's strange you haven't guessed it! That secret is his love for Tressie Taggart."

"Hadn't the least idee o' sich a thing!" and Tillotson fairly gasped. "Great sciss'ors, but that's awful. Jedgin' by myself, I know in reason it must be! But why don't he—"

He was about to ask why Tom didn't make his passion known to the object of it, when the truth came to him like an electric shock. The poor fellow knew Kennedy had gained that love; but, even if such had not been the case, the horrible disfigurement of his face, and the gulf that separated them in other ways would have kept him forever dumb.

"You don't—you can't know how sensitive Tom is!" Kitty asserted. "No one can know it who has not been with him as I have. That blotch on his face has been the burden of his life, and it has caused him to shun not only women, but men. And it has made of him a dreamy, nervous, shy man, longing always to be by himself, and hiding from his fellows.

"When I tell you that, you will know why he cannot reveal his love to Tressie Taggart. She is a good, sweet girl, but she could not return his love, and no one knows it better than he does. And, besides, he feels that she is as far above him as the stars are above the earth."

"Looks ain't everything," affirmed Jake, who was not himself noted for beauty.

"I know it."

"An' wealth ain't! If it was, I'd have a mighty poor hand in the game of life."

"I suppose that's true! I've never had enough of it to judge. But it would be useless for Tom to approach Tressie on the subject of love. You know it, and I know it—and Tom knows it better than either of us."

"And as he can't help loving her his heart is slowly breaking."

Kitty buried her face in her hands and sobbed as if her own heart were being crushed by the woes of her brother.

"It's bad!" said Tillotson, endeavoring to comfort her. "Tarnation bad! If lickin' anybody'd do any good, I'd feel like goin' aout an' punchin' the head o' the fu'st man I met."

As he thus gave vent to his vexed feelings a hoarse bellow came from the darkness outside and a shivering knock was given to the door.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

TIMELY AID.

THE sensations of Kansas Karl as the drugged wine slowly stole away his conscious-

ness and power of movement were horrible beyond description. His struggles to recall his vanishing sensibility and to get upon his feet were pitiful. He babbled confusedly and writhed as one bound with a weight of fetters; for through his dulled brain floated imperfectly the knowledge that he had been deceived and had fallen a victim to another deadly plot.

As for Madame Irene Marsden, she said never a word, but sat with distorted countenance watching his decreasing struggles, and with no more heart revealed in her face than is shown by the cat playing with the helpless mouse.

Then the veteran detective gave way to the numbing sensation that had crept over him. His head fell forward on his breast, and he would have tumbled from the chair had it not been for her restraining hand.

At this she turned the lamp somewhat lower, and gave a low whistle, which, however, echoed rather shrilly through the silent apartments.

In answer to the whistle, Philip Velpeau made his appearance from an adjoining room, a knife clasped in his hands.

"Got him, eh?" he whispered, bending over the apparently lifeless form and drawing the keen blade through his fingers. "That was well done. Exceedingly well done, even for you!"

"Don't!" hissed the madame, as he lifted the knife with the seeming intention of striking. "Haven't you a grain of sense? Do you suppose I want murder committed in my room, and so bring the officers of the law howling around me like a pack of wolves?"

"It's a big temptation!" he gritted, drawing back the threatening hand. "He may slip through my fingers again, as he did last night. If I had used the knife there, instead of fooling with that cord, he wouldn't be able to be here to-night, and all our trouble with him would be ended."

"Take him away from here, and then I don't care how soon you finish him. But not here."

There was not a trace of womanly pity in her voice.

"You're always afraid of your own precious neck," he snarled, "but don't care a Continental for the necks of other people."

"That will do, Velpeau!" she flashed. "You must have been drinking, to talk that way to me! Tie him and get him out of here! Better take him to the outskirts of the town, if you can drag him that far, and then the officers will have a mystery that will puzzle them to clear up."

"Drag him?" said the youth. "If I get him out of here I'll be doing well. But I've a horse and rig down there. Better turn the light a little lower. I don't want to be seen in this business."

"So, there are other people with a regard for their precious necks!" sneered the madame, as she turned to obey the injunction.

Velpeau thrust the murderous-looking knife back into his pocket and produced a bunch of stout cord, and again advanced on the helpless man.

As he did so, a snake-like object shot athwart the semi-gloom and settled in a graceful fold over his head; and the next instant he was jerked backward with terrific force, striking the floor violently.

A dark form bounded into the room, and the madame, frightened out of her wits, gave a scream and fled.

"A reg'lar she-devil!" growled Socorro Sam, for he it was who had so opportunely come to the detective's rescue. "Well, I'm blame glad she lit out, for I don't fancy a scrimmage with a woman. As for this feller," and he spurned Velpeau with his foot, "I guess the yank I give him with that rope jist about broke his neck."

Without giving further heed to the Cohort lieutenant, who was insensible from the combined effects of the shock and fall, Socorro advanced and bent over Kansas Karl.

The latter's slow breathing assured him that he was alive.

At the same instant Velpeau began to stir.

"Cuss ye!" Socorro gritted, a fierce scowl on his face. "I've half a notion to finish ye where ye air. You'd 'a' done that for him if I hadn't been laying clost."

After his narrow escape of the previous night, Karl had called on Socorro. The re-

sult of their conference was an order to Socorro to remain near his chief at all times. Thus it occurred that the scout was on hand to render assistance in this time of great need; and this is what was meant by the expression.

The detective was aware that danger might await him in the house of Madame Marsden, though he had no thought that the peril would come in the shape it did. His pard and ally accompanied him and remained in concealment during the time of the call.

The low whistle given by the madame caused Sam to believe he was needed, though his first idea was that the whistle was a signal from the detective. And making his way with cat-like tread to the madame's apartment, he was in time to thwart her murderer's schemes.

"Cuss ye! Lay still!" And Socorro gave the prostrate youth no very gentle kick with the toe of his boot. "If ye don't. I'll ha' to knife ye! I will, by gosh!"

Velpeau was beginning to collect his wits, and realizing the character of the man with whom he had to deal, he obeyed the command to the letter. Socorro had something of the reputation of a desperado with those little acquainted with him, and Velpeau did not think it the part of wisdom to venture an encounter.

"An' I s'pose that air female critter 'll come a-climbin' back d'reckly, a-yowlin' an' scratchin' like somethin' wild!" Socorro mumbled, as he again bent over Karl. "Drat a woman, anyhow! 'Specially that kind of a woman! I'd ruther have a racket with painted Injuns. I guess I'd better dig out o' hyer jist as quick as I kin!"

It was no easy task to lift the heavy form of the detective, but the iron-muscled scout accomplished it, and staggered with the burden to the door.

The bark of a tiny revolver sounded from the adjoining room, and the ball from the weapon plowed through Socorro's coat.

Madame Marsden, when the noise of the scout's lasso came whistling into the room, had believed that a squad of officers was in the corridor, and so had sped away in wild affright.

There was a rear stairway to the building, and on gaining this she halted, to get her bearings and settle on a line of action. No sounds seemed to issue from the room she had quitted, which would not be the case, she argued, if her first surmise had been correct.

For several minutes she clung irresolutely to the railing, not knowing what to do, and fearing the worst for Velpeau. Then, as the silence continued—she could not hear Socorro's mumbled expressions—she ventured to creep back along the route she had passed over in her hurried flight, and reached the adjoining room just as the scout was staggering to the doorway with the form of Kansas Karl.

Taking in the situation at a glance she drew the small revolver which she always carried in a pocket of her dress, and with a quick aim, fired.

It was fortunate for Socorro that her nervousness rendered her hand shaky and destroyed her aim, for on ordinary occasions she was a dead shot.

The crack of the pistol added wings of recklessness to Socorro's feet, and he bounded down the stairway at a rate that imperiled the lives of both himself and his friend.

But he gained the lower corridor before the irate madame could reach the top of the flight, and turned the angle leading to the outer door just as a second shot plowed dangerously near.

"Phew!" he panted, as he hastened into the darkness of the side street. "Waked up a reg'lar Gatlin' gun! That's the sheat, shore! Couldn't be anybody else. Well, all I hopes is she'll git pulled fer disturbin' of the peace."

And with this grim observation he ran on as rapidly as he could, seeking the darkest shadows for concealment.

He had not gone far, however, when he heard the madame and Velpeau dash into the street, and caught also the voices of the people who had been aroused by the shots.

He was fagged by this time, and feeling that he could go no further, he placed Karl on the ground, drew his revolver with one

hand and with the other endeavored to chafe some life into the apparently inanimate form. He intended to defend his charge to the last, should the madame and Velpeau be able to summon members of the Canyon Cohort to their aid.

The enraged madame had no notion, however of pursuing the daring scout, knowing that if she did so some awkward explanations would likely become necessary, and that when Socorro told his story, she and her coadjutor would be placed in a most unenviable light.

Thus it came about that when she and Velpeau were joined by the aroused residents, she related a concocted story about her apartments having been entered by a burglar, on whom she had fired, and who had managed to escape; and she gave as his direction of flight a course entirely at variance with the one taken by Sam.

Something of the kind Socorro guessed, when, from his place of hiding, he saw the crowd steam away in the opposite direction.

After waiting until he felt sufficiently rested to again go on, he once more lifted the detective in his strong arms, and made his way by slow stages to the residence of the Nolans, giving the shout and the kick against the door which had so startlingly interrupted Yankee Jake's love-making.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE COURSE OF TRUE LOVE.

On the same evening Tressie Taggart was sitting alone in her elegantly appointed room, watching with shadowed eyes the sinking of the sun behind the peaks of the western mountains. The scene revealed from her window was a glorious one, the splintered shafts seeming spires of silver and flame, and the broad, snow-laden crests changing to rollers of beaten gold.

But the picture caught by the eye made no impression on the preoccupied brain, and the brilliant colors faded into darkening lines without attracting the slightest notice.

There had been much of late to distress this gentle-hearted woman. She seldom troubled herself about business affairs, but the belief that matters were not taking their usual placid course had been driven home to her on more than one recent occasion. She had heard in a vague way of the labor troubles and the threatened strike; and of evenings when heavy lines of thought gathered on her father's brow, she fancied that he was oppressed by these things, or by fears of a financial crisis. Of the real fears that haunted him, waking and sleeping, she never dreamed.

Another distressing fact had obtruded itself on her; and that was the evident love held for her by Tom Nolan. Only within the past week had she been made aware of this passionate and hopeless attachment; and the unsought knowledge preyed on her unceasingly. She had been pleased to count the Nolans, humble though they were, among her dearest and warmest friends; and had taken much pains to exhibit her regard, and exhibit it in a way that should not wound by anything savoring of affectation or condescension.

She had long noticed Tom's shyness when in her presence; but he was always shy, Kitty had said, and for some time she thought nothing of it. But of late his too evident embarrassment; his apparently causeless flushings whenever she entered the house; his desire to avoid her; all told the story of his fight against himself in language not to be mistaken.

"And I have been the foolish cause of it all," she wailed accusingly, as she ran over such events as she fancied might have led to this deplorable state of affairs. "But I couldn't have been unkind to him, if I had tried; and I certainly never should have tried! I hope it isn't to be my fate to make people unhappy! Poor Tom!"

There was a little flutter of female pride back of the exclamations, for she was but a woman, and all women love to be admired by those of the opposite sex. But her grief was, nevertheless, sincere.

"Poor Tom! If, now, he could only have chosen one who might have returned his love! I'm sure there are plenty of women who would be proud to acknowledge him as husband or lover. He's good, and pure, and noble. There isn't any man more so!"

The words brought an involuntary comparison and turned her thoughts to Kansas Karl.

Kansas Karl! She had not known him many weeks, but the time had been sufficiently long and the opportunities ample to endear him to her. And herein lay the real secret of her recent distress. Her heart went out to her father in the troubles which seemed to be surrounding him; she felt a kindly and anxious pity for Tom Nolan; but the real "worm in the bud" was the apparent coolness which Kansas Karl had recently shown.

Ay! the course of true love never did run smooth, and never will while human hearts and human affections are cast in the same mold and subject to the same environments. True love has an over-anxious eye; an overweening desire for the raptures and blisses on which it is fed and by which it lives, and grows; and a constant and never satisfied yearning for the presence of the being loved. It is given to causeless depressions and fears, conjures calamities out of airy nothings and thoughtless and quickly-forgotten words, and whether on the mountain-tops or in the valleys, lives in a state of perpetual nervousness.

The deeper the love, the greater the mental disturbances it too-frequently gives rise to and the keener the anxiety; and Tressie Taggart's love for Kennedy, the detective, was too deep to be sounded and measured by ordinary standards. And hence it was that his seeming coldness and inattention brought fears that were torturing.

Ignorant as she was of his real calling and aims, and with no knowledge of the iniquities of her father, of course she could have no adequate idea of the motives governing him. And Karl dared not tell her why he avoided the house and absented himself from her presence. He dared not say that her father was a robber and murderer whom he was constantly engaged in shadowing; and that being thus engaged and knowing the real character of the man, he shrank from the visits that had been so sweet and pleasant. No! He could not say that. Neither could he meet Taggart as he had once done, knowing that the broker was fully aware of his character and mission.

News came to Tressie the next day that Kennedy had met with some mishap, the nature of which remained unexplained, and that he was lying very ill at his room in the hotel; and she had just decided to write him a note of kindly condolence, when he himself put in an appearance.

He was apparently in the best of health, and she had scarcely recovered from her surprise at seeing him, when he stood at the door threatening the integrity of the bell by his vigorous pulls.

A servant conducted him into the reception room and took his card.

Tressie essayed to greet him in a way that should show nothing of the emotions she had undergone, and fancied fondly that she had succeeded; but the detective was sharp of eye, and read her thoughts like an open book.

"And I heard you were ill!" she continued.

"Not exactly ill. I was drugged last night, and it has taken nearly all the time since for me to recover from the effects," and he gave her a detailed account of his visit to Madame Marsden and of what had there befallen him.

The recital greatly affected her; but he noticed a shade pass over her expressive countenance when the name of the madame was first mentioned. And when he asked the cause he was considerably astonished to see that her eye-lashes had become suspiciously moist.

When he pressed the inquiry she gave way to weak and womanish tears.

"What does this mean?" he queried, taking her hand and boldly drawing her to him. "You were not jealous of the madame?"

He felt he had a right to this privilege for, although the consent of Taggart had not been gained to their union, they were really engaged lovers.

"Tell me," he whispered, "did you feel hurt at my visits there?"

"I see, now, that it was very, very foolish in me," she confessed. "But I was really jealous, once. She is a very hand-

some woman, you must know; and it seems to me I was justified."

He had not thought of it at the time, but he was forced to acknowledge that Tressie had had good grounds for her jealousy.

He sat for a time in silence debating how much he should reveal to her, if anything, of his real character and occupation.

"No doubt there have been many things to mystify you and try your faith in me," he said, looking into her trustful and loving eyes, "and it may be there are some things I should have revealed to you long ago. I know you will pardon me if I have done wrong and believe that I thought I was doing right."

Her looks showed she could make nothing of what he was saying.

"I'm afraid I've given you a false notion of my calling. Perhaps I've never said to you in so many words that I came here to make investments in mining property, but I feel sure you gathered that idea from what I did say and from my actions. The truth is, Tressie, that my business is one requiring secrecy. I belong to what is known as the Secret Service, and am, in fact, a professional detective."

Tressie's notions of a detective's duties were somewhat hazy, and Kennedy was therefore forced to explain at considerable length.

"And so you see," he concluded, "I am oftentimes compelled to go where I otherwise would not—which accounts for my frequent calls on Madame Marsden."

"It's a dreadful business," she asserted, "and full of perils. Won't you abandon it, for my sake?"

"I wish I could!" he declared with much vehemence, thinking of Taggart. "I would be supremely happy, it seems to me, if I could abandon it this minute. But I can't, Tressie. Not now. Some time I may be able to leave it in an honorable way. To stop now would make of me a recreant to the trust that has been imposed in me."

"Oh, my dear!" and there was a wild and yearning fear expressed in the exclamation, "promise me that whatever befalls, you will still love me and be true to me."

"I promise," she said, solemnly, lifting her face to his.

"And you will trust me and believe in me under all circumstances?" drawing her closer and imprinting a kiss on the upturned face. "Be sure that you know your own heart, Tressie, for the day is coming speedily when your love will be subjected to such a trial as you can not dream of, now."

"If you are true to me," she whispered, "I am sure nothing can separate us."

And with her breath warm on his cheek he drew her down in an embrace expressive of his desire to retain her forever.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE GREAT STRIKE.

THE labor troubles which had so long been a source of uneasiness and disturbance broke at last in a terrible storm of passion and wrath. Work was stopped simultaneously in all the mines and smelters, and the angry workmen gathered in threatening bodies and paraded the streets with mottoes and banners indicative of bloody and anarchistic tendencies. Meetings were held nightly for the purpose of denouncing the bosses and those who seemed to sympathize with them; and feelings of riot apparently took possession of the entire laboring populace.

Almost every town has witnessed such scenes and suffered from them. Nothing is so rabid and unreasonable as a mob, no matter what the causes which created it. As a witness of this, one has but to recall the doings of such bodies during the great labor troubles at Pittsburg some years ago.

The unorganized rabble at Leadville was no exception to this general rule, and its acts and threats drove many of the other citizens into defensive organizations intended for the protection of life and property. And throughout the course of the strike these opposing bodies came into frequent conflict.

Kansas Karl and his friends endeavored to keep aloof from these contending factions. But this proved no easy matter in a contest where every man was considered in the light of either a friend or foe. They resolutely

refused to join with either side, however, and as a result made enemies of both.

The hatred of the leaders of the strikers was especially directed against the detective because of the mistaken belief that he was a friend of Taggart. This belief seemed a very reasonable one when everything is taken into consideration. He was known to have been Taggart's guest when first coming to the camp, had since been seen to call at the mine-owner's office, and rumor had it that he was expecting soon to become Taggart's son-in-law. Every indication, therefore, served to foster the general conviction.

Taggart, trembling for his life, surrounded himself with a guard of trusty men, an example which was imitated by many other mine-owners, and which served to add to the bitterness of the hatred held for them by their late employees.

For several days, while this contest between labor and capital was being waged hottest, Kansas Karl found himself unable to do any work in his own peculiar line. The unwonted state of affairs so unsettled everything that he knew not which way to move.

He had given himself up to the persistent shadowing of Taggart in his character of the Black Sphinx as well as in his own personality, but the real Taggart seldom stirred from his office or residence, and never unattended, and the Black Sphinx ceased altogether his visits to the gaming-tables of the Lode Star.

Thus Karl found himself apparently in the position of Othello—his occupation gone.

He had ascertained that Madame Irene Marsden was to be found no more at the rooms she had so recently occupied. She had doubtless left them with all haste after the miscarriage of her plot against the detective's life, and had either fled to Denver or was somewhere in hiding in the camp, trembling for fear of an arrest.

"Let her go," was his smiling comment. "I don't care to arrest a woman, and I'll have to when the time comes if she can be got at. She tried to murder me, it's true, but I ought to have had more sense than to have fallen so easily into her trap."

A day or two of close observation of events served to convince him, however, that the madame was still in Leadville, and was as full of scheming and villainy as ever. No single incident brought this conviction, but a multitude of minor occurrences that would have passed unnoticed to a mind less trained.

Wherever the detective went he was followed by Socorro Sam as persistently as by his own shadow, but in a way that should not carry to any one an idea of the real relationship existing between them, or a question as to why they were usually found so near each other. And in this manner they visited many of the labor meetings, and the meetings of the clubs which had been organized for defense, as well.

Usually they went openly, as men interested in a speedy solution of the difficulties involved, but on several occasions where it seemed likely the prejudice existing against the detective might lead to trouble, they appeared in disguise. This was a course peculiarly perilous, for should they be thus discovered, no other conclusion could be reached than that they were spies; and spies were a class liable to summary punishment.

In many of the meetings of the workingmen the delicate manipulation of the madame was observable. Members of the Canyon Cohort were there as alleged miners, and by their vociferous pleadings for the rights of labor bore down the influence of the more conservative element.

Their reasons for so doing, which Kansas Karl divined from the first, were soon revealed to him in unmistakable colors. Their fiery harangues wrought the reckless and unthinking masses up to fever heat, and when robbing and looting seemed to become suddenly epidemic, the road-agents did the work and the workingmen gained the obloquy.

Similar results almost always follow in the trail of a bitter strike, for there is a class of worthless riff-raff hanging forever to the skirts of labor, whose only desire is to gain a living by dishonorable and sneaking methods and pose and whine as a race of martyrs.

At Kennedy's advice the Nolans carefully

avoided every act which could be construed by the strikers as savoring of lack of sympathy with their aims and efforts. This was not always easy, but Jasper and Tom endeavored to follow as closely as possible the detective's advice. It would not do to absent themselves entirely from the meetings, for that would draw attention immediately to their lukewarmness; and so they were found frequently at the incendiary gatherings, listening but taking no active part.

Jasper was, however, a man of decided convictions, and found it extremely irksome to be forever compelled to hold his tongue when he was bursting with a desire to speak out his honest sentiments, treasonable though they might be regarded. And it must be confessed that on more than one occasion he overstepped the bounds which a wise discretion would have set to his utterances.

He had all along been regarded with distrust by his fellow laborers, and these mild expressions of opinion served to fan this into a flame of hatred. The men who had previously attacked him urged with lying insinuations that he was an enemy and sneak in the pay of the bosses.

The result may be readily guessed. He and Tom were waylaid one dark night as they were proceeding homeward from one of these meetings. Their first intimation of peril was a loud call for them to halt. This they did, turning about to see who it was that thus dictatorially commanded them.

Then out of the gloom swarmed a half-dozen men who had been among the most violent and frenzied of the speakers of the evening.

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded Jasper, drawing his bent frame into an erect position, and facing them defiantly.

A sneer and a laugh were the immediate answers.

"You'll come with us!" said one, laying a hand on the old man's arm.

"I demand the meaning of this!" Jasper repeated, shaking off the hand. "What do you want?"

"We're a-goin' to give you two a taste of switch!" declared another.

At this Tom pushed the foremost backward, and called for his father to run, evidently intending to do his utmost to cover the latter's retreat, regardless of what the consequences might be to himself.

"No you don't, my young rooster!" was the brutal reply, and the leader gave Tom a stinging blow in the face, while the other ruffians pressed closer about them, waving their fists and muttering savage threats.

Tom was, on occasion, quite as quick-tempered and indiscreet as the elder Nolan, and he returned the blow with a force that did credit to his weakened muscles.

The act precipitated a general fight, and what the result might have been is difficult to determine; but when matters seemed going hardest with father and son and it appeared they would be overpowered and perhaps beaten to death, a new element was injected that speedily changed the course of events.

This new element was the redoubtable Socorro, who had been instructed by Kansas Karl to follow the Nolans home that night and see that they were not disturbed.

Socorro and the detective had been in attendance on the meeting in disguise, and the sharp eye and quick intellect of the latter had detected signs which led him to fear an assault on the Nolans was being contemplated.

He would have accompanied Socorro, but for the fact that he wished to shadow a certain individual who had been making himself conspicuously obnoxious to all sensible men, and whom he believed to be the Cohort lieutenant.

This compelled a separation of himself and the scout, but he preferred to encounter the risks which that might entail rather than leave the Nolans unprotected.

"Whoop!" yelled Socorro, dashing into the melee with his customary recklessness.

"Take that, you wide-mouthed pizen-splitter!"

With the words, he bowed the leader over with a terrible right-hander, and then swung out his left with the ponderousness of a steam hammer, catching a second under the jaw and sending him to the earth like a lump of lead.

The remaining three turned their attention from the Nolans and attempted to close with the scout, but Jasper and Tom sprung up at the same moment and by grasping two of them by the shoulders held them back.

Again that iron fist swung out, and the third man falling beneath its stroke, the others wrenched themselves from the detaining grasp of Tom and his father and fled wildly from the scene of their defeat.

"Knocked out in the fu'st round!" and Socorro, after giving the fallen men each a vigorous kick spun triumphantly round on one heel and waved his battered hat like a victorious banner.

"Leave 'em there," he said, throwing the emphasis of infinite scorn into the words.

"Leave 'em there for a warnin', same's we used to hang up dead crows in the corn-fields back East to scare other crows out'n the thievin' bizness."

"Naw! They ain't dead!" in answer to Tom's anxious query. "Can't kill sich cusses by knockin' of 'em down; though it'd be a good thing sometimes if ye could."

"An' now we'd better mosey, for the chaps that run off so chipper may come back d'reckly with a gang o' the same kind o' cattle at their heels."

Of the wisdom of Socorro's advice there could be no doubt; and it was acted on at once, Socorro accompanying the Nolans home to see that they mere not again disturbed.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE LION'S CLAWS.

WHILE public attention was drawn to the strike and to the rioting that followed in its wake, the holding up of the stages by bands of masked men recommenced. As there had been nothing of the kind for some weeks the people naturally concluded that this was also being done by the looters who had grown overbold by their successes in the town. And as the looting was believed by many to have been done by certain of the strikers, these latter were saddled with the odium of the new crimes.

Karl knew, however, that the striking miners were entirely guiltless, so far as the robbing went; and hastened to relieve himself of this opinion to the Leadville officials.

He knew also that the attacks on the stages were being made by members of the Canyon Cohort, led no doubt by the striping lieutenant and guided by the shrewd cunning of Madame Marsden and Andrew Jackson Taggart.

Of course in thus expressing himself to the authorities he was compelled to adduce evidence of his capacity for judging, which he did by revealing himself as a member of the Secret Service.

"If you will give me four good and reliable men who are willing to obey me implicitly, I think I can break up the organization which has so long infested this section," he declared, and his words and manner tended to carry conviction.

"I hardly see how we can spare the men from the force," said the marshal; "but we'll do it, for I'd like most awfully well to see that gang broken up."

The men selected were of the rough-and-tumble, fighting variety, but there could be no doubt of their courage, and the detective expressed himself as well pleased with them.

When presented before him, he requested that they meet him within an hour at a place appointed; and then thanking the officials for their co-operation, he took his departure.

By the appointed time the four men were gathered in an upper room of a well-known resort, they having dropped in one at a time, to avoid suspicion.

Socorro Sam was there also, and if not exactly arrayed in feathers and war-paint, was as eager for the trail and its dangers as any roving Apache.

Karl smiled them a warm greeting, when he saw that each had come armed as if for hot and deadly work.

"I think you'll do to tie to," he asserted, scanning their weapons closely. "You are men of courage. I want you, likewise, to be men of discretion. There will doubtless come a time when we'll have some close and heavy fighting. But it will not come just yet; and until it does you'll not need such an armament."

"Revolvers in the hands of men skilled in their use are quite as deadly as rifles, and I advise you, therefore, to discard the guns and get each a brace of the best revolvers you can find."

"And now as to the details of our contemplated work. Our sole aim is to capture these road-agents and their leader, or leaders. I add 'leaders,' for I'm satisfied the band is a double or triple-headed concern. There seems no chance of doing this by trailing them, for Socorro and I have tried that to our satisfaction."

"I have thought, therefore, that the most promising plan is to disguise ourselves thoroughly and become regular passengers on the stages. If the robbing continues we are sure to be in one of the stages held up. Then will come the close revolver work, for we'll have to do some fighting, and kill or be killed if we don't pitch up our hands at the word of command."

The men nodded to show that they understood the nature of the peril, and were prepared to meet it.

"There is seldom any resistance made to these fellows, and we can force them into confusion, I think, by a quick attack. And if we leap out of the coach and press them hard we can throw them into a panic."

"I don't wish to deceive you, gentlemen, into thinking that a victory can be easily gained. On the contrary, I want you to comprehend fully the danger you are walking into. These rascals will fight, and especially if driven into a corner and threatened with capture will fight desperately. More than one of us may lose our lives in the attempt to take them. But with the benefit of a surprise we can take them!"

"It is not at all likely the entire band will be engaged in any one raid, and if we can defeat the crowd holding up the coach and capture those we do not kill, we can force those captured to lead us to the secret haunt of the band, and there, by a little strategy, take every member."

It was a bold scheme, and one which, as the detective had said, would probably result in the death of some of those engaged in it. But not a man blanched at the prospect.

The day following was the one set for the first trip of the disguised men.

That evening, Karl called on Tressie, not knowing but it would be his last visit. But he said nothing to her of the deadly undertaking on which he was about to enter.

When the next outward bound stage rolled through the streets of Leadville there were six ordinary looking men in it, in addition to some others with whose movements the reader can have no interest. These ordinary looking men were arrayed in miner's garb, and in the talk which naturally ensued between the passengers when the stage had gotten under way, they represented themselves as being disgusted with the state of affairs in the town and as anxious to go to some district where they could get to work without awaiting the tedious solution of labor difficulties.

Karl felt jubilant over the prospective success of this new line of effort, but he was destined to realize the truth of the old observation "that the best laid plans of mice and men gang aft agley."

On the return trip the coach was crowded to the point of suffocation. Kansas Karl had stopped over only long enough with his command to permit each man to don a new disguise. At the outset he did not like the looks of the new passengers, who were a surly lot. But he believed it to be almost impossible for the Cohort leaders to have obtained knowledge of his plan, and therefore crowded down his feelings of uneasiness.

There was a lady in the stage—a lady heavily veiled, and who sat in one corner mile after mile and said not a word to any one. This action on her part was, however, very natural, when the character of most of the other occupants is taken into consideration.

"Do you know who she makes me think of?" he whispered to Socorro who sat next to him. "If I wasn't sure it can't be I'd say that it is none other than our good friend, Madame Marsden. Be careful! Don't look toward her, or she may guess we're talking about her!"

Socorro could scarcely contain his surprise.

"Of course it can't be she, and I'm foolish for ever dreaming of such a thing," the detective went on. "But, all the same, we ought to keep our eyes open for mischief."

Socorro obeyed this injunction to the letter, and it was well for both that he did so.

When the wildest and roughest part of the trail was reached, without a command or a word that might have given warning, the passengers, who up to that time had been boisterously talkative, arose in their seats and rushed on Karl and his guard. A desperate fight ensued, but two of the men on whom the detective had relied joined the assailants, and he found himself unable to cope with this augmented force.

As soon as the struggle commenced, the driver stopped the horses to inquire what was the matter, and to order quiet; and the pretended passengers, who were road-agents, in reality, dragged Kansas Karl from the vehicle, and tried to serve his companions in like manner.

They would have succeeded, too, but for the prompt energy of Socorro Sam. Realizing the full nature of the treacherous outbreak, the scout leaped from his foes, and jumping to the ground, climbed with monkey-like agility to the box beside the driver. Then, careless of the weapons that were leveled at him, he whipped the horses into a dead run.

The detective was half-unconscious from a terrific blow which had fallen on his head, but he understood the meaning of the scout's bold act, and gave him an encouraging shout, for which he was brutally stricken to the earth almost as soon as it was uttered.

"Stop! Stop!" shrieked the woman, who seemed to suddenly comprehend the perils to which she had been subjected. And then, as no one offered to climb to the box and force the new driver to lay down the ribbons, she tried to leap from the stage, notwithstanding the speed at which it was going.

In this she was prevented by one of the two men who had remained true to the cause of Kansas Karl.

The first wild burst of speed enabled the stage to turn the canyon wall, and prevented the slaughter of the horses that would otherwise have taken place, for the first command of the road-agent leader to his followers was for them to shoot at these. It probably also saved the lives of Socorro and the regular driver, for their position was an exposed one, notwithstanding the fact that they bent forward, and as low as possible, to keep the shots from touching them.

But there was another point of peculiar danger only a short distance away, and that was where the sinuous trail made a bend in the opposite direction, bringing the stage and its inmates again into view of the outlaws.

Knowing the deadly peril that there awaited him, Socorro urged the well-trained and obedient horses to their swiftest gait. Never had a similar vehicle thundered with such reckless velocity over such steep and boulder-strewn gradients. Half the time two of the wheels were spinning in the air, and the body of the coach bounced so that it seemed it must surely leave the springs, and go flying into the canyon.

When the other bend was reached the firing of the road-agents was recommenced, and a regular hail of balls whistled through the air, and battered themselves against the rocky walls. One of the horses was hard hit, but he did not immediately fall, and the stage passed otherwise in safety around the point.

Then Socorro, aided by the willing driver, who was a reliable and honest man, cut loose the lead horses. It was one of those that had been struck, and the poor creature was now actually dying in the harness.

There was no time for sentiment, however, and it was left in the trail with its mate, while the stage was again driven forward at thundering speed.

CHAPTER XXXVII

IN THE SECRET CANYON

THE encouraging shout which Karl gave as Socorro Sam so boldly took the reins into his hands, the detective greatly feared would

be the last words he should ever utter, for he thoroughly realized the desperate character of the men with whom he had to deal.

He could not resist the impulse to cry out thus, however, even though the cry might be the signal which should send a pistol ball crashing through his brain.

When the bouncing stage had safely passed the last bend, one of the men pulled a rough beard from his face and revealed the dark and sneering features of Philip Velpeau.

"Well, it looks as if your friend has escaped us this time, but we've got *you*, and you're the game we were gunning for!"

The lieutenant bent on him a look of diabolical hatred as he hissed out the words.

"Yes, we've got *you*!" repeating the phrase as if the contemplation of the thought pleased him. "And you'll not get away from us in a hurry, either!"

The detective could not help thinking that circumstances just then seemed to warrant the truthfulness of the assertion. But the dastardly blow which had stricken him to earth made him anxious to say nothing that might bring a similar one, and he maintained a discreet silence.

Notwithstanding the fact that it seemed hopeless now to expect to overhaul the fleeing stage, Velpeau sent a squad up the trail in the direction of the bend. The squad was placed under command of one of the very men whom the detective had so lately taken into his confidence at the instigation of the Leadville authorities, and who had proved so recreant to the trust reposed in him.

"If it wasn't for such men as Socorro I'd begin to think the human race a race not to be trusted under any circumstances," he mentally commented, as he watched the men out of sight with quite as much anxiety as that manifested by Velpeau. "It's almost impossible to tell whether one is dealing with an honest man or a scoundrel."

It cut him to the quick to know he had been so completely deceived, for it seemed a reflection on his discernment and judgment.

He was annoyed also by the fact that the leaders of the Canyon Cohort had been able to insinuate their followers into the police force of the camp, the very place where they would be capable of doing the most mischief. By taking these men into his confidence his plan had been immediately revealed to Taggart and the madame, and steps taken to compass its overthrow and at the same time crush him. The Canyon Cohort appeared to be truly a hydra-headed and argus-eyed monster with which it were foolish for any individual to try to cope.

Velpeau, while the pursuing squad was absent, unloaded a vast amount of accumulated bile on the head of the unfortunate detective, abusing and defaming him in a most exasperating way.

Kennedy bore it for a long time with heroic fortitude, but stung at last to a reply, said:

"My dear lieutenant, I shall not try to compete with you in the bestowal of compliments, for it's quite evident you want me to say something that will give you an excuse for killing me."

Again Velpeau gave him the diabolical look with which he had first greeted him, then turned away to look for the return of the men sent after the stage.

It was almost a half hour before they came back, and they were leading the horse which had been left by Socorro with its dying mate. They had not even come in sight of the fleeing vehicle, and reported that they had no doubt it was far on its way toward the town.

On receiving this report Velpeau gave the order to advance. Kansas Karl's hands were then tied behind his back, and they set out with him in their midst as a closely-guarded prisoner.

The outlook appeared very dark for the helpless detective at that moment. He believed he was being taken to the secret retreat of the outlaws, and that Socorro had never been able to discover, keen trailer as he evidently was.

It seemed reasonably certain that the scout would go on to the town for aid. But before that could be done the detective would be miles away from the place where the capture had been effected, even if he was yet living, which seemed to him a matter of much uncertainty whenever he recalled the lieuten-

ant's present temper. It was so evident that the latter longed to put him out of the way once for all, and thus in a manner redeem his several failures in that line that Kansas Karl found himself more than once wondering why Velpeau hesitated to use the power he then possessed.

The route taken by the outlaws was a very wild and rugged one, leading across boulder-set slopes and high and rocky divides. No horse, unless it was as sure-footed and agile as a goat, could scale such steeps, and the one they had started with had been sent off in another direction under charge of a single man.

The capture of the detective had taken place about mid-day, and night was at hand before the road-agents came to a permanent halt.

Through an intricate maze of hills they had worked their slow way, and now halted in the shadows of a deep and dark canyon which it seemed the light of day must surely never enter. At one side of this prison-like place was a cozy *cul-de-sac*, in which were some log cabins, and where a fire was burning.

"This is certainly the much-sought-for secret canyon," thought the detective, staring about in the gloom. "Oh, if Socorro were but here, now, with a dozen good men at his heels!"

But that Socorro could ever reach him there seemed impossible. He had surpassing faith in the scout's abilities, but he did not expect him to accomplish miracles; and when he recalled the tortuous and precipitous character of the way it looked as if a miracle would be necessary to enable any one to follow it.

Only two or three men were in the little pocket when they arrived, but these had evidently been expecting them, for a hot supper was in preparation, the aroma from the strong coffee filling the air with an agreeable fragrance.

Karl was ordered into the furthest corner, where he was left with his hands bound, and given to understand that if he made a break for liberty he would be riddled with rifle bullets.

There was little to induce him to attempt anything so foolish. The outlaws were between him and the only path of escape. Their guns reclined near them and in the belt of each was a brace of revolvers. And even should he pass them and enter the unknown defiles he would surely be overtaken or break his neck in pitching over some unseen precipice.

The position was a most disheartening one, but it could not be remedied, and with the stoical philosophy of his class he endeavored to make the best of it and not worry himself into a useless fever by forecasting his probable fate.

After a time the lieutenant brought him his supper, and while he ate it recommenced the taunts and sneers with which he had regaled himself at intervals throughout the day.

"A nice den, Kennedy!" bending on him a searching look. "You won't find a nicer in the mountains."

"It's passable!" and the detective helped himself to a liberal mouthful of some appetizing dish.

Velpeau was silent for a moment and then returned to the charge.

"I shouldn't think you'd have such an appetite, after the events of the day! Do men of your stamp never lose any meals?"

"Not unless something startling occurs!"

"Ah! and what happened to-day was not startling? What would you consider a startling event?"

"If you should forget yourself and become for a moment a gentleman," was the unexpected reply.

The lieutenant bit his lips and scowled, but he did not strike the detective, as the latter half anticipated he would.

"I'll have the satisfaction of getting even with you for that, Kennedy! Put it down in your note-book, will you?"

With this threat he walked back to the fire, leaving Karl to finish his supper undisturbed.

A few minutes after there was a perceptible stir among the outlaws, and the masked captain, unannounced, stalked into the midst of the group. He was clothed as when first

revealed to the reader. Where he had come from was not then apparent.

"Ah! That's why Velpeau has been afraid to vent his spite on me," the detective decided. "He has known the captain would call him to account for it this evening, if he did. Now, I suppose I shall soon know what they're going to do with me. Nothing very pleasant, it would be safe to wager!"

He shrugged his shoulders and tried to continue his supper, but found it impossible, and then sat staring at the group about the fire.

Soon the captain walked away in the gloom and disappeared, and Velpeau came toward the prisoner.

"The captain wishes to confer with you on important business!" he said, removing the remnants of the meal and giving the dishes to a man who came up at that moment. "Follow me, please, and be careful that you don't twist the tail of the rattler, for I don't want you to go over the range while I'm not by to see the fun."

Realizing that resistance would be useless and foolish, and anxious to know the worst at once, and have the uncertainty ended, Kennedy arose and followed him without question.

To his surprise the lieutenant bent his footsteps toward the opposite corner of the rear wall of the *cul-de-sac*, if it could be said to have corners, and there passing around a towering rock entered a dismal-looking hole that seemed to lead into the bowels of the mountain.

The gloom was impenetrable, but Velpeau walked straight on as if the way were quite familiar, and the detective followed his example, being guided wholly by the sounds of his footsteps.

Several angles were quickly turned, and then the faint light of a lamp came to them; and when they had gone a few feet further they entered a small room.

The lamp was resting on a table near the center of this underground apartment, and by the table stood the captain. His mask had been removed, and as he turned toward them, Kansas Karl saw the familiar face of Andrew Jackson Taggart.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

SOCORRO TO THE FORE.

WHEN the stage had covered what he considered a distance sufficient to put them out of reach of the road-agents, Socorro gradually reined in the horses until they came to a full stop, gave the lines to the driver and leaped to the ground.

Swinging open the stage door he climbed within and drawing one of his revolvers ordered the woman to surrender.

Naturally she screamed with hysterical emphasis, but Socorro was inexorable.

"I don't like to haf' to tie a woman," he asserted, "but in this hyer case they ain't anything else 't can be done!" and he directed one of the men to seize and bind her.

"What is the meaning of this insult?" sobbing the words piteously. "I appeal to you as gentlemen to release me!"

"Can't be did!" said Socorro, resolutely. "I know ye, and I'd as soon trust a she-tiger."

Then he reached forward and drew away the concealing vail, revealing to the light the white and startled face of Madame Irene Marsden.

He then examined the bonds to assure himself they were firm and strong, and backed out of the stage-door, motioning to the men to follow.

Once outside, he secured both doors, and beckoned to the driver to descend from his perch. Then he walked to one side of the trail and engaged in a whispered conversation with the three men.

"Somethin's got to be done to resky Kennedy!" he announced. "An' at the same time it won't be safe to let that woman git away. Now, I have a leetle propositon which I hope ye'll all agree to, unless you kin s'gest somethin' better. An' it's jist this: Let the driver go on to town as fast as he kin with the stage an' the woman, and when he gits there let him hand her over to the off'ers as a member of the road-agents."

"While he's a-doin' of that, me and those other two chaps'll take the back track same's as if a tribe of Injuns was after our ha'r. I'd

like more men, but if we go on to the camp to git 'em the agents 'll have sich a start we never kin foller 'em, not if we had a rig'ment o' trailers. I know that, for I've been through the mill. Our on'y chance is to git on their trail while it's hot."

It was a plain statement of the case and easily understood. Some discussion of minor points followed, but they did not talk long, realizing too thoroughly the value of time. The stage-driver then mounted the box and drove furiously away, and Socorro and his two followers left the trail and hastened with all the speed consistent with proper caution toward the point where the late fight had taken place.

The road-agents were in motion when they gained the vicinity of the point, but they were not yet out of sight, though a few minutes more would have placed them beyond the first range of hills.

Fearing an ambush or trap of some kind, Socorro left his men in hiding and beat the neighborhood thoroughly before making an advance. He discovered the signs left by the man and the horse that had taken the other route, but that was all of a suspicious character, and he returned soon for his aids.

It required the utmost caution to keep near the retreating party, and at the same time remain in concealment, but Socorro accomplished the difficult task to perfection, and when the secret canyon was gained, he and his followers were lying in the gathering shadows on an adjacent slope, near enough to see and hear much that was transpiring. Even the aroma of the coffee reached them and tantalized their hungry stomachs.

When the shadows grew denser, Socorro, having given the location a thorough study, led his men by a circuitous path to the bed of the canyon, and here by creeping forward like cats they finally wormed themselves almost into the midst of the camp.

From this coign of vantage they saw the masked captain when he made his appearance: and from it Socorro followed him when he left the fire, having instructed his men to remain where they were until his return.

It will be remembered that the masked captain in going to the apartment back of the canyon walls did not pass near Kansas Karl, nor take the route followed by the detective under the guidance of Velpeau.

Socorro wriggled along in his wake, sometimes on his hands and knees and sometimes in a half upright posture, led solely by the sounds of his footsteps. And when the interior was gained and the captain removed his mask, the scout was but a few feet away.

"It's Taggart, shore 'nough!" he muttered, crouching low to avoid the rays of the lamp. "The same, ole p'izen skunk, just as Kennedy said 'twas. But, he's doin' diff'runt frum what he ever done before. He don't gin'ally go 'thout that jigger over his pliz. An' it's said as how nary a galoot of the hull band would know him if they sh'd meet him in broad daylight. Somethin' important goin' to happen 'round hyer, I'll bet a gol' mine!"

Taggart had scarcely removed his disguise when Velpeau appeared with the prisoner. The lieutenant was inclined to stay and hear the conversation, but Taggart ordered him out, and he went without a word.

"We'll not need an introduction, Mr. Kennedy!" and Taggart faced the detective with a malevolent sneer. "I've known you for some time, and you've had your private opinions about me for about an equal period. So we may claim that we're acquainted and proceed to business."

Kennedy bowed with as much civility as if he had been greeting the broker in his office.

"You came here to trap me, and have been yourself trapped!" and Taggart's smooth face took on a fiendish expression. "You should have known better than to tamper with fire. I have no hesitation in saying to you, now, that I am 'Buck Toliver,' and a good many *aliases* you never heard of. The knowledge will never do you any good. And what mystery there is about my life you will never have the pleasure of clearing up."

"I have it from a runner who is just in, that Madame Marsden, through your agency no doubt, has been placed under arrest. You may gloat over the knowledge if you

wish, but I can assure you she will be released just as soon as I can return to the camp and the necessary papers can be made out.

"You haven't made a move since coming here, my dear Kennedy, that I haven't known all about. Ay! and I knew what you were contemplating before you came here, and for that reason, and to study the kind of man I would be compelled to deal with, I invited you to my residence after you had been wounded.

"Yes, even the attack on the stage and the wounding of you by Velpeau—for it was that lieutenant of ours who fired the shot—were likewise parts of my carefully laid plans; and a hundred times since, when you thought you were simply obeying the behests of your own sweet will, you were following paths I had marked out for you."

Karl was amazed at the man's statements and at the knowledge of his purposes which they revealed.

Seeing this Taggart continued:

"And Tressie, your own Tressie! I presume you never dreamed that she has been winding you about her fingers for the sole object of aiding me."

"I won't believe it!" burst hotly from the detective's lips. "And if you were a man of any decency or principle you would not thus link the name of your daughter with your crimes!"

"Be careful!" and Taggart drew a small pistol from an inner pocket of his coat and took a quick step forward.

The fire in his eye was of a peculiarly dangerous and deadly kind, and what he might have done under this sudden impulse of exasperation can not be known, for at that moment the sinuous coil of a lasso shot toward him from a point directly in his rear, and he was jerked from his feet with lightning-like quickness, the noose so pressing and choking his throat he could not utter a sound.

Kansas Karl was quite as surprised by this sudden interruption as Taggart must have been, and his surprise was not lessened by seeing the scout leap from the darkness after the flying noose and pin the road-agent captain to the earth before he had had time to attempt to regain his feet.

Before saying a word Socorro proceeded to complete his work by producing a ball of stout cord and tying Taggart up so he could hardly wiggle, at the same time inserting a gag in his mouth.

"Now, let's cut sticks!" Socorro whispered, tossing Taggart's weapon to his friend. "I've got a couple o' chums layin' out hyer, an' they'll be a-wonderin' why I don't come back an' a-chargin' the hull blame camp d'reckly, just fer keeps!"

"St! Hyer comes that fool lieutenant! I feel like knifin' him fer chippin' in, now!"

He dropped on all-fours and crept toward the entrance from which low footfalls showed that Velpeau was about to emerge. And when the slim form of the young lieutenant came into view the snaky rope again shot out, with so accurate an aim that Velpeau went down pretty much as his chief had done, and was soon after lying by his side, bound and gagged in the same manner.

"We kin rake in the hull b'ilin', if they'll on'y be 'commodatin' enough to come one at a time that-a-way!" Socorro chuckled, as he knotted the cords. "Keep yer years open, so I kin git ready fer the rope trick."

"Let me understand the situation!" said Kennedy, drawing his enthusiastic friend into the darkness of an angle. At which command Socorro explained in a few words all that had occurred within the circle of his knowledge.

"Perhaps we can get these men out of here, then," the detective suggested. "If we can, and can hold them, it will mean the breaking up of the band, for without Taggart's planning and Velpeau's reckless leadership they would be bound to go to pieces. No other men could hold them together as those two have."

"P'raps it kin be done," and a pleased chuckle escaped the scout's lips. "Le's see if we kin drag 'em into the opening back there. Then I'll git our men an' we'll make a big try of it."

It was a work of some difficulty to move Taggart, though the light form of the lieu-

tenant was scarcely a load for Socorro alone.

When this was done the scout departed for his followers, who by this time had grown tired of waiting for him. With them he soon returned, and the combined efforts of the four were sufficient to bear the strangely-captured road-agents from the canyon to the wooded heights just above the camp.

But the work took time, as it had to be executed with the utmost stillness and caution, and it was no more than finished when excited cries below warned them that the absence of Taggart and Velpeau had been discovered and a search was being commenced.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A HERO INDEED!

The outrages committed by the strikers grew in frequency and violence. It was no longer safe for the friends of the mine-owners to appear on the streets without an armed escort. The Nolans were not the especial friends of the bosses, but they were so accounted. Being laboring men their sympathies were rather with those of their own class, and what they opposed was the foolishness of a strike at that time and the methods employed. Nevertheless they were regarded as the enemies of their fellow workmen, and were in peril of life and limb every time they left the security of their own cottage.

After the attack last mentioned no further personal violence was attempted. Tom still held his position in the store-room of the Sexton Brothers, a post peculiarly perilous at that time, for the bullion held there was a fascinating lure for the thieving element. But, as the strikers grew bolder, and danger increased, an armed guard was added, and after that young Nolan felt reasonably secure. This action really did away with the necessity of his constant presence, but he came and went and made his rounds with as much care as if alone, feeling that on him in a large measure the responsibility of the watch still fell.

On the afternoon in which Madame Marsden was brought into town by the stage-driver, Tom was aroused from his mid-day sleep by the sudden entrance of Jake Tillotson.

"Git up!" said Jake, giving him a shake. "The devil's broke loose, 'cordin' tew all report!"

"Wh—what you do you mean?" Tom asked, yawning frightfully as he got out of bed.

"Kansas Karl's been captured by the agents an' Socorro an' some men hev gone after 'em. An' the stage-driver's brought in Madame Marsden all tied up like a horse-thief. I seen her a minute ago, and the driver bein' a friend of mine, whispered the yarn intew my off ear. But come along! I'll tell you as we go."

It was a startling statement, but Tom found the part relating to Madame Marsden literally true, for he saw her given into the hands of the marshal of the camp and led off to prison, though the charges preferred by the driver were not made known to the public.

When the driver departed from the official presence he was surrounded by a crowd of inquisitive people to whom he gave evasive and misleading answers; but, being drawn to one side by Tillotson and Tom, and knowing they were friends and confidants of Socorro, he told them the story of the attack on the stage and all the events concerning it of which he had knowledge.

"It looks bad for our friend Kennedy," said Tom, as he walked away with the Yankee. "But we'll hope Socorro may be equal to the emergency. Do you suppose we could organize a party and follow him, and be able to give him any assistance?"

"It's what the driver's a goin' to do," said Jake. "And I'm a-goin tew jine his procession. But, yeo'd better stay hyer, and look after matters arround home and at the store-house."

It required some argument to induce Tom to look at his duty in that light, but he was convinced finally by Tillotson's logic and consented to stay, while the Yankee hurried away to aid the driver in collecting a force of men.

The decision was fraught with grave consequences to young Nolan.

He was unusually restless that night, and from his post of observation at the store-

house, constantly scanned the sleeping camp. His thoughts hovered much about the beautiful girl whom he so passionately loved, and who, he realized, could never be anything more to him than she was then.

Suddenly, as he watched, his gaze turning frequently toward the point where the Taggart mansion rose darkly against the sky, he saw a tongue of flame shoot heavenward. The horror of the sight fixed him for an instant immovable in his tracks. Then he found his legs and his tongue, and shouting the cry of "Fire!" he rushed wildly from the building, leaving it to the guardianship of the armed men, and ran with fleet footsteps toward the threatened point.

This was the home of the Taggarts, and as he sped along he repeated his alarm, rousing people from all quarters.

But so fast did the fire progress that by the time he reached the threatened house the roof was all ablaze, and the lapping flames were curling from the upper windows.

The aroused citizens streamed at his heels, but the work of the incendiary—for there could be no doubt the fire was of incendiary origin, and that it had been started by some of the strikers—had been so well done that it seemed now impossible to save the building from total destruction. Then, too, the water supply was wholly inadequate for such needs, and the citizens, willing and brave as they undoubtedly were, lacked leadership and organization.

Young Nolan's first thought had naturally been for Tressie. He was beginning to think she was not in the house, when an upper window which the fire had not yet reached, but to which it was rapidly progressing, was opened, and from it she looked in a helpless, appealing way.

A cry of horror went up from the throng, and a cold sweat broke out on Tom's body; a moan escaped his lips. If there was one thing in the world Tom Nolan feared and dreaded more than another it was fire, for fire had given him that horrid red brand which had taken all the beauty from his face, and sent him through the world a being to be commiserated and shunned. The very sight of those leaping and threatening flames made his inmost soul sick.

And the being he most loved was seemingly to fall a victim to the fire he so much dreaded! Even then her screams and calls for help were half-drowned by the roar and crackle of the conflagration.

"Oh, my God!" and Tom covered his face for an instant with his hands and sobbed like a child. "Give me strength to be a man just this once!"

It was the appealing cry of combined duty and desperation torn from his heart by the supremest trial of his life.

Without further hesitation he removed the blinding palms, and looked straight at the slim and beautiful figure framed in the open window. The crowd was staring, stricken dumb with horror, and not a man had yet moved.

For Tom Nolan the moment of hesitation had passed and the instant of endeavor had come. The interior of the building below was a sheet of flame, so dense and hot it could not be penetrated. Seeing this he called for a ladder to be hoisted to one of the upper windows. His cry awoke the men to action, and a ladder was produced after a hurried search.

The window from which Tressie leaned was so situated that a ladder could not be raised to it, being in the third story and at an angle of the wall difficult of access. Besides the ladder brought would only reach to the second floor.

Willing hands hoisted it into place, though there were not a few who declared that the boy was certain to sacrifice his life if he made the effort.

"Would you see her burned to death before your eyes?" Tom asked, closing his lips firmly.

Then with a wet blanket in one hand he climbed with marvelous agility toward the fiery hell above.

Those of the crowd not completely silenced by the terrors of the situation cheered wildly as he mounted.

In a short time the window nearest was gained, but that he could enter it seemed impossible, for flame and smoke poured from it in smothering volumes. Yet he

hesitated not, but tossing the blanket about his head and shoulders he leaped into the hissing billows as if believing with "She" that they could have no power to harm his body.

The room into which he had entered was one blazing mass and seemed to be already eaten through. But he stumbled to the door leading into the corridor. He was already sadly burned, but here the fire had not made such progress and he leaped up the stairway.

At its head he encountered another sea of leaping and blinding flame. For one instant he drew back in fear. But he quickly gathered his courage, and again enveloping his head rushed through the even-like space. Then he staggered against the door of the room in which Tressie was, and bursting it open rushed in.

The side by which he had entered was on fire, but it had not yet worked its way to the window where she stood appealing for aid to the crowd below and not realizing that help was so near.

"Come!" Tom shouted, staggering toward her. "Wrap this blanket around you. Do just as I say and I will save you, yet!"

His splotched face shone with a heavenly radiance as the fierce firelight played over it. He was horribly burned and dimly realized it. He had felt the fire eat away the skin of his hands and lap like the hot tongue of a vampire at every point exposed to its greedy rage. But notwithstanding this he had not faltered.

She gave a little scream as she saw him. His manner was too imperious for questioning, however, and she obeyed.

"Now!" he cried, clasping one of her hands and dragging her after him. "Cover yourself well. Come!"

The blanket was fairly smoking from the heat to which it had been subjected, but she enveloped herself as completely as she could and suffered herself to be led blindly forward.

Then she felt the furnace breath of the fire in her face and knew that she was being borne on by young Nolan. She felt him stagger under her weight, and would have leaped down but that a horrifying fear made her obedient and quiet. It was well she did not know that the weakness under which he reeled was caused more by the pain of the terrible burns he was receiving than by aught else.

How he ever managed to reach the lower window Tom Nolan never knew. But, while the crowd was staring and wondering and conjecturing as to whether or not he had perished in his brave effort, he suddenly appeared there, and in feeble tones asked that some one come to his assistance.

Then he swung himself with his burden from the window and began to descend. Half-way down he was relieved of his fainting charge, and feeling the reaction that frequently comes in such cases he reeled and would have fallen to the ground but for the assistance of restraining hands.

He had to be lifted from the ladder; and then, as he attempted to straighten up and smile at those gathered about him, he tumbled prone on his face. And when he was lifted to his feet it was seen that he was burned beyond all hope of recovery.

CHAPTER XL.

STRANGE REVELATIONS.

TOM NOLAN by sacrificing himself had saved Tressie Taggart, for, although the fire had eaten through the blanket in several places, and portions of her clothing were blazing, the burns received by her were not of a serious or disfiguring character.

Tom, however, had inhaled the deadly flame, and was carried home in a dying condition.

For hours he lay in a semi-stupor, tossing in a delirium of pain, and revealing by his incoherent mutterings that he was again passing through the fiery ordeal.

But when the sun arose he became quiet and opened his eyes in a gaze of consciousness.

The room was filled with sympathizing friends of the family; and near the bed, their arms encircling each other, sat Tressie and Kitty.

The ghost of a smile came to the black-

ened and partially bandaged face as he saw them thus.

"I am going," he whispered in his strange, croaking voice. "Kiss me, won't you?"

It was uncertain which of the two he spoke to, but each obeyed.

As they did so the tread of heavy feet was heard in the adjacent room. It was followed by low but excited conversation. Then the door was hastily pushed open and Philip Velpeau darted into the chamber of the dying boy and kneeling at the bedside, cried in anguished tones:

"Oh, my brother! My brother!"

But Tom Nolan heard not the cries. With Tressie's kiss warm on his lips, he had passed silently and peacefully to "that undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveler e'er returns."

Velpeau was pursued instantly by Karl, whose prisoner he evidently was; and realizing that young Nolan was indeed dead, he followed the detective from the apartment.

The lieutenant's anguished exclamations naturally created much surprise, but, standing in the awful presence of Death, this surprise was not then manifested.

And now a few words concerning the events of the interim:

It had taxed to the utmost the combined skill of Kansas Karl and Socorro to evade the vigilant pursuit of the road-agents, and to retrain, at the same time, possession of the prisoners.

When near the camp, however, they were revealed to the outlaws by the rising of the sun, and were forced to seek an advantageous point among the rocks and baffle for their lives as well as for their prisoners.

When it seemed they would be compelled to run for it, with the chances greatly against them, they were agreeably reinforced by the men gathered the previous day by the stage-driver and the Yankee. A hot fight followed, in which several of the outlaws were slain and others taken.

Hurrying on to the camp after the fight, the detective and his friend heard of the events of the fire and of the expected death of Tom Nolan, and stopped at the Nolan cottage, with their prisoners, in passing.

When it was known among the latter that Tom could not live, Velpeau earnestly petitioned that he might be allowed to see him. Hence the subdued and excited conversation in the room adjoining the death chamber. Believing Kansas Karl seriously thought of refusing him permission to do so, Velpeau broke away from the guards and rushed into the apartment, dropping at the bedside and moaning out the words quoted.

At a later day Velpeau's meaning was made clear by his own confession. It was a long story as told by him, but is here given in a condensed form:

Tom Nolan was his half-brother, but he had been entirely unaware of the fact until the capture of the former by the road-agents.

Tom, it will be remembered, in his effort to escape, had his clothing partially torn from him. The rents revealed to the young lieutenant certain scars on Nolan's arms which convinced him of their relationship and led him to release his prisoner and speak the mysterious words: "Blood is thicker than water!"

Jasper Nolan, as revealed by Velpeau's strange narrative, was not the father of Tom and Kitty; but, on the contrary, he was the father of Tressie Taggart!

While Tressie was yet an infant he had gone to the Far West. There, after much hardship and toil, he eventually succeeded in gaining a fortune in the placer mines. There was then no great trans-continental railways to make communication sure and speedy and nearly all his letters miscarried. Having satisfied his thirst for gold, he was on the point of setting out for his Eastern home when he fell into the toils of Taggart and Madame Marsden. What the real names of this precious pair were was always a matter of doubt, for they had in their long and checkered career sailed under many.

They were young, then, but as full of villainy as in their later days, and as eager for gold.

Jasper Nolan's real name was Walter Throckmorton.

Taggart and his companion in crime cov-

eted the gold Throckmorton had accumulated, and which he constantly wore, sewed up in a leather belt that he carried about his waist. How to get it, though, was for some time a puzzling question, for he was watchful and wary, and being young and powerful, Taggart feared to try to overcome him by a resort to muscular force.

The madame was then, as later, a shrewd and keen thinker, and as unscrupulous and heartless as she was shrewd. She had on one occasion rid herself of a dangerous enemy by a subtle poison, the secret of whose preparation she had bought for a round price from a Gypsy fortune-teller.

The suggestion came to her that here was also a case in which she could make the poison do her a service. And so she brewed the deadly decoction according to the old Gypsy's recipe; and when Throckmorton called on them on the evening of his proposed departure, Taggart managed to engage his attention while the madame poured some of the mixture into his cup of tea.

As in the case of Kansas Karl, to whom a similar preparation was administered, its effects were quick and startling, but not fatal. To Throckmorton, however, the result was almost as terrible as death itself. The draught bereft him of his senses, and when he recovered, to find his gold gone, and with it his pretended friends, he had but a hazy recollection of what had befallen him.

With the exception of the dim and shadowy events of that night, the past was to him as if it had not been. His own name was even forgotten.

For a time he wandered, houseless and hopeless, about the streets of the town, and then falling ill of a lingering fever, he was taken in and cared for by a miner named John Nolan.

This John Nolan had a daughter, Kitty, who was then little more than a baby. When Throckmorton recovered he remained with Nolan, and, despairing of ever again knowing his own name and realizing that a name of some sort was a necessity, took the name of Jasper Nolan, and represented to the world that he was John Nolan's brother.

Within the year John Nolan died, and Jasper became as a father to Kitty. At about this time, also, a waif was found deserted by its unnatural parents, and this waif Jasper adopted, and it grew up under the name of Thomas, and became the Tom Nolan of this story.

The waif was the child of Taggart and Madame Marsden!

Philip Velpeau was Madame Marsden's son, by her first husband, a celebrated French officer and duelist.

To Philip she always clung, though she had been perfectly willing to abandon Taggart's child, born to her about two years later, with an ugly and strange birth-mark on his left arm.

When three or four years of age Tom met with the accident which marred what beauty of feature he possessed; but it was by the birthmark that Velpeau recognized him, for, being an eavesdropper by instinct, he had passed many hours in secretly listening to Taggart's and the madame's conversations, and had thus gained the particulars of Tom's disfigurement.

The revelations concerning Tressie were equally remarkable:

When Taggart and the madame fled, believing Throckmorton had fallen a victim to the poison administered, they found in the belt with the gold a paper showing there was in England a large amount of money due his heirs. Not satisfied with what they had already obtained, they began scheming to get possession of this.

As a preliminary step they visited the Eastern town which the paper revealed as Throckmorton's home, and instituted some cautious inquiries. They found that Throckmorton's wife was dead, but that he had an infant daughter, who was being cared for by strangers. Representing themselves as relatives of Throckmorton, they had no difficulty in obtaining possession of the daughter, for the strangers were already tired of their charge.

Then they visited England, but there were certain provisions in the will rendering it impossible for the money to be obtained before the daughter reached the age of twenty-one. The sum was a tempting one, how-

ever, and they decided to retain possession of her until that time should arrive.

Thus she grew up as Taggart's daughter, for the madame did not care to trouble herself with her care; and, as the years sped by, Taggart conceived for the beautiful girl a warm and fatherly attachment.

Velpeau, in making these strange statements, which he did under oath, was impelled by two powerful motives: He hoped for clemency on the part of the prosecution; and having given expression to those singular exclamations at Tom Nolan's bedside, he felt it to be the part of wisdom to explain their meaning. From his father he had inherited an intense and loyal attachment to those known to be related to him by ties of kinship, and this feeling had moved him in his acts toward young Nolan.

But, the confession did not save him. With Taggart and others of the Canyon Cohort, he was tried for his crimes. And, although Taggart spent all his wealth in an effort to defeat the ends of justice, all were convicted, and sentenced to long terms of imprisonment at hard labor.

As for Madame Marsden, she escaped the ignominy of a trial by self-administered poison.

Time chased away the shadows brought by devoted Tom Nolan's melancholy fate, although his memory was never forgotten. A year later Kitty was happily married to Jake Tillotson, and at the same time and place Tressie Throckmorton was joined to Charles Kennedy, the detective and man of her choice. Her English fortune descended to her on this marriage, and with it they have been able to live very comfortably without the necessity of Kennedy again resorting to his perilous calling.

The kindly Fates did not forget Jasper, nor Socorro Sam. The former is happy in the love of his "children," as he affectionately styles Tressie and Kitty and their respective husbands, and makes his home alternately with each family. And Socorro! He wedded a Leadville girl, and declares he has the "sweetest and best wife in the West."

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